



PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

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# SPARKS

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PASSIONS

The Practicum for Civic Leadership  
at Trinity-Pawling

by Maria Buteux Reade





TEAM APOLLO: War on Drugs

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**Syrian refugees. Sustainable energy. The war on drugs. International experts have battled with these issues for years and still struggle to come up with viable solutions. Last spring, a dozen juniors had their chance to grapple with these global concerns and develop their own responses. And they did it on their own, without aid or direction from faculty.**

Welcome to the Practicum for Civic Leadership, an initiative sparked by Headmaster Bill Taylor as a means of challenging students to interact with the world around them while developing the five C's: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship.

"The program is designed to uphold two cornerstones of our mission: to prepare students to be contributing members of society amidst the challenges of an ever-changing world, and to encourage boys to become creative problem-solvers and informed communicators," said Taylor.

Trinity-Pawling students enjoyed their first taste of project-based learning in the winter of 2016 as they worked in groups and dove into structured projects largely developed by faculty members. The Practicum for Civic Leadership places the onus of designing and researching squarely on the shoulders of the students.

Supported by an E.E. Ford Foundation grant, the Practicum is comprised of multiple components geared towards upperclassmen. Each component of the Practicum — Winter Projects, Global Collaborative Challenge, and Senior Independent Project — has academic credits and is a graduation requirement. In the spring of their junior year, students will be placed randomly into groups of four; each team will be given a real-life problem on a local, national, or global level. The four students will collaborate to unpack the issue, research causes and solutions, and devise a practical response. By the middle of May, each team must present their findings in a public forum.

"Last spring, we tested the first phase on three teams of volunteers who were tasked to wrestle with a problem: the refugee crisis, sustainable energy, and the drug wars," explained Slade Mead, Director of College Counseling, who helped orchestrate this initial phase — termed the Global Collaborative Challenge. "Each team had to present and defend their findings before a panel of faculty who assessed the students on the quality of their research,

the viability of their solution, and the effectiveness of the communication. And they had twelve minutes to complete their public presentation."

Talk about real life pressure!

The team that studied sustainable energy concluded that nuclear energy was the most viable solution for the 21st century, delineating the comparative drawbacks of hydro, solar, wind, and coal. "It didn't matter whether we agreed with their conclusions or not. We assessed the students on the quality of the argument and oral presentation. And the four of them knocked it out of the park," Mead recalled. Another group tackled the Syrian refugee crisis and approached it by geographic region. "They walked us through Europe's vastly differing responses, reaction in the Middle East, stances in the U.S. and the rest of the world. At the end, they offered their considered opinion on how the United Nations should handle the crisis. They wrapped it up with thirty seconds to spare."

While the junior year component of the Practicum emphasizes collaborative group work, the senior year component requires independent initiative. Prior to departing for summer vacation, each rising senior commits to a topic of personal interest. Among the list of proposals: prison diversity issues, the cause and effect of the May 6, 2010 "flash crash," the rising popularity of Premier Football in the U.S., the potential impact of the Paris Climate Talks on the global economy, baseball stadium management, and the restoration of a Jeep. One aspiring ceramicist wants to analyze the actual costs of making pottery, factoring in the amount of clay used per piece, glazes, energy consumption in the firing, and the final pricing and marketing of the finished piece. "The goal is for each student to construct an experiential learning opportunity that relates to his chosen field of interest," Taylor explained.

The next step is pairing each senior with a mentor who has relevant experience in the student's field of interest. Mentors are selected from a pool of alumni,



### TEAM GEMINI: Global Energy Sustainability

Man Hang Chong, John Ruggiero, Jih Wook Kwon, Dennis Ilmela

parents, or other friends of Trinity-Pawling. The student develops five essential questions related to his topic and emails them to his designated mentor who will offer guidance or practical advice. A mentor may choose to get involved further with the student's project or simply respond to the initial five questions.

The student's next challenge is creating an actual product and developing a format for its public presentation, reflecting what he has learned. The presentations will be in front of a panel of faculty and students, and the final projects will be assessed on the quality of research, creativity, and communication. "Public exhibition is a crucial aspect of this program," Taylor continued, "because it adds a level of real world accountability, which is certainly a motivating factor. Dropping that shield of comfort a bit often encourages growth."

## Mentoring Fosters Connections

Maura Cody, Director of Parent Relations, and Hannah Alley Keller, Director of Alumni Relations, are working to cultivate the mentorship component. They will draw

mentors from a global pool of alumni, parents, and friends of the School, people who are willing to share their knowledge and experience in a given field with an interested senior. "Mentorship can be an extremely powerful means of connecting and giving back," said Keller. "We've gotten very positive responses from alumni and parents who are eager to offer guidance and encouragement to students who may share a similar interest in a topic or pursuit."

Bill Taylor had experience instituting a similar program at his previous school. "I met with our rising seniors last spring to introduce the program and explain how successful engagement in the process could lead to future jobs, internships, or research positions. These collaborative projects introduce students to the concept of networking and have the potential to open doors with great practical benefit." Slade Mead sees additional value: "Embracing these projects means that each student will have something distinctive to communicate in the college process, something unique that sets him apart from other applicants."

The multi-tiered approach introduces both hard and soft skills. Juniors learn to collaborate effectively with peers

they might not necessarily select. In other words, it's similar to many work situations. They develop problem solving skills and become more adept at oral presentation. In the next portion, seniors have the opportunity to explore an area that might be of personal or professional interest.

For example, Hunter Olstein '17 wants to pursue filmmaking, so the School connected him with Paul Rachman '78, an acclaimed filmmaker who came to campus earlier in the spring to present to the student body. Olstein will have the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge and perhaps practical experience working with Rachman as a mentor.

"This capstone experience cultivates skills we want evident in Trinity-Pawling graduates: problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration," Taylor said. Add to that time management, perseverance, self-reflection, and the ability to work independently.

Chris Taylor '17 offered his perspective on the Practicum and project-based learning. Last winter, he and another student worked closely with three faculty members who helped them produce a music CD. The musically talented Taylor, who plays eleven instruments, overdubbed his instrumentation on multiple tracks. "I played tenor sax, piano, bass guitar, and drums on this CD, created the cover art with several original photographs, and wrote the liner notes. Mr. Kelsey helped with the musical aspect, Mr. Gillette assisted me on the cover creation, and Will Taylor '00 offered advice on the liner notes. I never dreamed I could make an actual music CD."

Coming off that successful winter project, Chris heeded an email last March from Mr. Mead seeking one final volunteer to participate in the Syrian refugee crisis project. And he's glad he took that risk. "To be honest, I had no idea what was happening in this crisis, but as the spring went on, I gained so much knowledge. It also was interesting because almost every day, the situation evolved and something new emerged. That kept the project very much alive, and my team had to keep developing new opinions as things changed each week." Chris also discovered he enjoyed collaborating with three classmates whom he hadn't known well beforehand. "We each brought a different skill set to the team in terms of technology, research, and oral presentation. We couldn't have tackled this solo, and we gained a ton of respect for one another."



**TEAM MERCURY: Syrian Refugees**

Min Sung Park, Christopher Taylor,  
Matthew Gaston Galarza, Nikolai Degenhardt

This fall, Chris will take his increasing passion for music production to the next level through the Senior Independent Project (SIP). "I want to learn more about the actual process of recording music. I'm working with a professional music producer and learning about perfecting tones and mixing levels, so I've expanded from playing music to actually producing it. These projects have opened my eyes to new opportunities I never imagined. And it's been a ton of fun!"

Creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and citizenship. Thanks to the Practicum for Civic Leadership, a 21st century Trinity-Pawling education encompasses more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic.