The Governor's School on Public Issues and the Future

For one intense month between their junior and senior years, talented students meet at Monmouth College in New Jersey to discuss issues larger than themselves and reflect on ways they can contribute to the public good.

Can high school students develop a vital sense of responsibility for the world and of their own capacity to make a difference throughout their lives? The Governor’s School on Public Issues and the Future of New Jersey addresses this question with an approach that merges citizenship education and personal development. Designed for students between their junior and senior years, this one-month intensive honors program held at Monmouth College has challenged hundreds of young people to foresee a life of contribution to the public good as they become leaders in their professions and communities.

The summer between the junior and senior years in high school is a key time in the odyssey from adolescence to young adulthood. At this age, intellectually talented young people can imagine their central life commitments as they prepare to choose a college and as they spend what, for most, will be their final year at home. Our research indicates that students this age can learn to reason on the level of college students two to four years older than themselves (C. Keen 1990).

Although the students at the Governor’s School have in common their age and potential, they also reflect the extraordinary diversity of New Jersey’s people. They come from urban, suburban, and rural settings, are socioeconomically disparate as a group, and represent great cultural and ethnic diversity. And yet they are drawn together by a common desire to converse about big and complex ideas—such as environmental issues, world hunger, and the interconnectedness of all people—with individuals their own age who share their intelligence and often their passions, hopes, fears, and yearnings.

The faculty, staff, and other adults who participate in the school are exemplars of committed citizenship and global vision who are ready to pass a mantle of caring for the world to the coming generation. Few of the students, talented as they may be, have experienced much serious conversation with adults outside their families and schools. And while parents and teachers often provide dynamic role models, the expanded range and quality of interaction with the Governor’s School staff excites the students’ imaginations about who they themselves might become as adults.

The School’s Four Interactive Elements

Four complementary program ingredients are designed to blend students’ personal involvement and open inquiry with their intellectual awakening: intensive courses, the evening series, integrative seminars, and informal learning.

The intensive courses. The intensive courses form the major intellectual
component of the program. Last summer’s courses included: Ethics and Public Policy; Future Studies: New Jersey’s Prospects and Changing Global Realities; Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism; Conflict and Conflict Resolution; New Jersey and the International Economic System; and Environmental Issues and Policy. Students explore the historical roots, present state, and future implications of each subject; devise and articulate questions and topics for further study; set specific problems and devise solutions; and design and carry out both group and individual projects. Weekly field trips provide firsthand experience with the issues at hand. For example, the environmental issues class witnessed recycling alternatives at a wastewater management plant and a composting plant. Through their explorations, students find that New Jersey is a microcosm of the nation and the world.

The evening series. All students and staff participate in a lively set of evening discussions, seminars, simulations, and debates. They are often joined by experts and key participants in public issues from around the state, who themselves exemplify participation, responsibility, and concern for the public good. The bulk of a visitor’s time is spent responding to the questions posed by students, who assume the position of responsible citizens, namely, having to clarify their views about topics they lack the time to study in depth. The conscientious citizen must learn to respect and rely on expert opinion but at the same time to demystify it. Our students come to recognize that often there are no easy solutions to the complex problems facing their communities, their states, their nation, and the world—and that it’s important not to give up trying to solve them.

The integrative seminars. A more personal level of learning is pursued within the context of integrative seminars and shared problem solving in the school community. During each integrative seminar session, about 10 students, assisted by 1 or 2 staff members, synthesize the significant learning that is taking place. For every seminar, each young scholar prepares a short position paper, possibly to share with others, in which he or she reflects on the most important learning that has occurred since the last meeting. In doing so, each student considers a set of queries designed to help clarify the substance and the circumstances of the knowledge in order to identify insights, connections, and new questions and draw out personal implications. Thus, they come prepared to share, discuss, deviate, and integrate. Seminar leaders help the students draw connections between large-scale issues and their own lives, probe personal commitments and images of the future, and understand and employ multiple perspectives in the analysis of public dilemmas and personal ethical choices.

The informal learning environment. To balance intellectual challenge with deep personal involvement and open expression of ideas and feelings, a strong sense of community and trust must be created within the group. Toward that end, the faculty and directors and their families live on campus with the young scholars and the counselors, sharing meals, recreation, and conversation. They try to minimize many of the gaps that usually exist between students and faculty—serving as role models as well as teachers. For one intense month, extensive knowledge, experience, and language are shared in a caring community.

The life of the community also serves as a forum for learning to participate in the decisions of society. We encourage the students to take seriously this opportunity to exchange ideas with people who have different personalities, interests, and backgrounds—to see it as an invitation to share their own stories and to begin, by listening, to share the story of “the other.” As Sharon Parks (1987) has stated eloquently, the sharing of stories in the encounter with the other has tremendous power to lead us into the experience of compassion and trust. The imagination has the capacity then to apprehend a larger and more adequate whole that begins to enrich and transform our own stories. Our own stories thus become inclusive of the other—of diversity, of pluralism. It is little wonder that in their evaluation of the school, the Governor’s scholars...
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rate these ongoing conversations—resulting in their heightened appreciation of and openness to fellow travelers in the community experience—as the most valuable aspect of the experience. As one student put it, "The openness of everyone there, the opportunity to express myself, the chance to learn from others, and the overcoming of narrowminded tendencies and prejudices (by myself) all affected me in ways that I can't begin to understand."

An Object Lesson
An outstanding teachable moment occurred about midway into the summer's session during one evening series event. Students were engaged in a simulation called Guns or Butter, whose immediate goal is to devise means of trade and negotiation to address imbalances in the global economic order. Chips representing resources and food—and actual bread and water or cake and milk—had been unevenly distributed among the group. The unjust image of the world set up in this simulation, coupled with the chance to cut loose after so much intense study, proved too potent a mixture: one mischievous scholar started a food fight during the first round of bargaining.

As events progressed from playing out the theme of the simulation to plain abuse of food and persons, staff and students alike called a quick halt to it. There was a long silence. Then the faculty leader skillfully used this poignant moment to start a powerful debriefing session. For two hours, scholars stood up all around the room and defended their actions, accused each other, apologized, and made fresh commitments to care for the world together. One after another, they sought to explain to themselves and to each other what had happened in those brief minutes—and how it could help them to understand world problems of scarcity, distribution, and the escalation of conflict.

Taking It Home
Eventually, there comes a moment when the students realize they will soon depart from the rich community they have shared. They begin to make promises that will continue to bind them together. These ties must now be stretched—by the very promise to maintain them—beyond the community, into a wider promise to engage with the world they have learned about so intensely. One scholar wrote of her experience carrying this covenant home:

Governor's School really made a different person of me. Now, when I hear about something that affects me, I want to know: How? Why? And what can I do about it? Also, I try to explain to my friends how important it is to get involved in something that will affect their lives. I've started to work on the Global Awareness Day to be held at my school in May. I'm very excited!

And the program has a long-term impact. Since nearly 30 percent of the participants attend five-year reunions, clearly the students continue to regard this as one of the pivotal experiences of their lives—even after four years of college. Moreover, they are continuing to dwell with the questions that came alive for them at the Governor's School of Public Issues. As an alumna from 1988 who observed the 1984 group at their five-year reunion as they met for an integrative seminar session stated:

I was struck by their intensity. The enthusiasm they still feel about Governor's School was encouraging, and their acknowledgment of Governor's School's effect on their lives gave me hope.

Guns or Butter was designed by veteran global educator, Bill Nesbitt, and published by Simile II.

References


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