



OPEN DOOR

From the beginning, Millbrook High School has raised no barriers to enrolling in its Diploma Programme. Coordinator Loren Baron credits that approach with helping spur the programme’s growth.

The 29 students in the first cohort of Millbrook High School’s Diploma Programme (DP) graduated in 2013. In 2017, the number almost tripled to 86, and the 2019 cohort has 115 students.

Those numbers are impressive, but the school in Raleigh, North Carolina, US, is not resting on its laurels. Instead, it is encouraging a student-led initiative that is working to strengthen its already-robust open access programme.

The initiative is called the Equity and Access Committee, which works to ensure that minority and low-income students understand the opportunities the DP offers and to increase diversity in the school’s programme. “It really started with two conversations with two students,” coordinator Loren Baron says. One was Alexis Stone, whom he was advising as she worked on her Extended Essay on institutional racism through American history. Alexis asked him why there were so few minority students in the programme. He said he could not answer that and asked for her thoughts. He had a similar discussion with student Victor Linzau, who mentioned that a group of students was discussing that question. Along with Spencer Maingi from that group, a few other students and counselor Shaunte Adams, the committee was formed in the fall of 2016.

Everything about the committee, from structure to process to membership, was informal. It met about four times during the year, but the small number of meetings does not reflect how active the members were. The first task was “to get some of the students’ perspective as to what barriers and limitations that individuals have in their minds about joining the programme,” Stone says.

Millbrook High School (public): 9th through 12th grade

First offered the Diploma Programme (DP): 2009

Total number of students: 2,446

DP coordinator: Loren Baron

Principal: Dana King

“*From day one, my philosophy was always open access, but what I’ve learned over several years is that the philosophy of open access and the practice of open access are not always the same.*”

—LOREN BARON, DIPLOMA PROGRAMME COORDINATOR, MILLBROOK HIGH SCHOOL

Stone was a senior when the committee began its work. Earlier that year, she had talked with other students to find out “why they had the mindset that there were limitations for them that prevented them from taking a serious interest in the programme,” she remembers. “I realized that some of the common denominators were that people felt the programme wasn’t for them, that they were not represented by the programme. It became less about whether you had the skills or dedication but more about representation in the programme.”

Stone’s insight paved the way for the committee to focus on strategizing “the most effective ways to reach out and show that we have an initiative to represent them in the programme.” To reach out to as many students from all backgrounds as possible, the committee’s student members decided to visit every 10th-grade English class. Their message was, “We’re not here highlighting ourselves as minority students, but simply as IB students speaking about the value of the DP for anybody interested,” Baron says.

Access committee members usually introduced themselves and talked about their individual reasons for joining first and then provided background on the programme, Maingi says. “The goal was to dissolve the stigma that the DP isn’t for everyone,” he says. “You don’t have to be a specific type of student to join the programme as long as you’re willing to work hard.”

“If you go in with an open mind and are eager to adapt and willing to learn differently than how you were taught your whole high school career, then you can really have a lot of success in the programme,” Stone adds.

While his statistics do not prove a correlation, Baron says that the numbers of students that began signing up for the programme’s introductory meetings jumped and the diversity of student interest really started to increase after access committee members’ classroom visits.

When Baron came to Millbrook as the first DP coordinator, he had three goals. One was to build a large programme, both because he believes in it as “the

Envoys’ Message

Alexis Stone and Spencer Maingi, two members of the **Equity and Access Committee at Millbrook High School**, visited a lot of sophomore English classes last year to talk about the DP.

Stone:

“The interdisciplinary nature of the programme is basically an uncanny representation of the interconnected nature of the world The real-life application of how your studies and your education and your knowledge of the world and surroundings around you are not specific to any one line or course of work or class that you take but really are applicable in different areas of your life.”

“What I’d say to the students who don’t feel like they are exceptional enough to enter the programme or take the risk because of representation issues: If you feel like you’re not represented and you do have access and the opportunity to, then be the instigator of change and make the programme how you want it to be for others. Your participation will open the door even wider for someone else.”

Maingi:

“I wanted to do [the DP] because I felt like it would be a good way to prepare me for college and challenge myself. ... It challenges your beliefs and forces you to think about things in a way that you’ve never seen before. That’s valuable for the real world when you have a real job. People won’t always have the same beliefs as you. It’s important that you understand your own beliefs.”



Alexis Stone

model of reflective, insightful academic opportunity” and because a larger size creates cost effectiveness. Another goal was to keep the quality of the programme high. The third goal was to reflect the school community at a school that currently is 3 percent Asian, 16 percent Hispanic, 29 percent African American, 3 percent mixed-race and 47 percent Caucasian. “So from day one, my philosophy was always open access, but what I’ve learned over several years is that the philosophy of open access and the practice of open access are not always the same,” Baron says. “To say you are open access and let anybody sign up isn’t enough. I had practices that ultimately unintentionally probably suggested to people that this program isn’t for you.”

Sometimes teachers or administrators have asked Baron whether students who have signed up for the DP are appropriate for it. His thinking on such concerns is that it is impossible to know ahead of time what each student is capable of. “We just can’t be gatekeepers,” he says. “We can’t tell you what each kid is capable of. We can’t tell you which student will rise to the occasion.”

To grow its DP, Millbrook takes outreach seriously. During annual visits to all the middle schools whose eighth-graders are slated to go to Millbrook, counselors talk about the programme, Adams says. The DP also is discussed each spring when middle school counselors come to Millbrook to work on the academic schedules of incoming ninth-graders.

In addition, Baron offers information sessions to the parents of 10th-graders from November to February. Alumni, current DP students and their parents and Baron talk with small groups of no more than 10 families. “We want it to be very personal. We want them to know what they’re getting involved with, what the value and challenges and schedule will be like,” Baron says. “If we are going to be open access, they have to make good, informed choices.” In 2016, there were roughly 17 sessions.

Among the topics that DP students discuss at these sessions are why they wanted to be in the programme. Maingi cites two reasons: academics and the community that the Millbrook programme has. He struggled somewhat in his classes during his freshman and sophomore years and was afraid to ask for help, he says. “Community was a big drawing factor for me,” he explains. “In joining the programme, I knew I could always ask people for help.”

Leveraging Language

Even foreign languages are put to use as a way to increase access to the programme at Millbrook High School.

Students who are fluent in their native language other than English may study a self-taught literature course in that language and replace the language acquisition course.

“We have accommodated students doing this in Arabic, Danish, French, Spanish and Vietnamese,” coordinator Loren Baron says.

“We offer this to honor the student’s native language and allow them to study this one course in their first language.” Doing this also allows students greater access to the DP, as it makes it easier for them to study language without having to start and study another language when they are already fluent in at least two, Baron says.



Spencer Maingi
and Victor Linzau

Maingi is not the only one to appreciate the DP community. While having the DP on their high school transcripts attracts students, Baron says, “along the way I think there’s a bit of evolution where they realize all the things we actually promoted are true.”

To gather feedback on the programme, Millbrook surveys DP students. The responses are overwhelmingly positive, Baron says. One of his favorite pieces of data comes from a couple of years ago in answer to the question of whether students would recommend the DP to a friend. That year, 95 percent of the students said yes, they would recommend; 81 percent earned the Diploma. “So even the students who were really struggling thought it was worthwhile,” Baron says. “I thought that was really telling.”

As impressed as Baron is with Stone, Maingi and the other members of the Equity and Access Committee, he says, similarly insightful and intellectually capable students are everywhere. Other schools, too, can initiate an access committee—and it would take one simple step: “One of the things that allowed this to happen was we allowed ourselves to start with a conversation.”

Testimonials

“This programme brought purpose and focus to my daughter’s high school experience.”--Che-Von Stone, mother of Alexis Stone

“The IB program helps students find what is uniquely great about themselves. More than the academics, the IB program’s CAS requirements encouraged my son to try new things and get out of his comfort zones. That’s where growth really happens. The program’s holistic approach prepares students for their step into college: armed with confidence in their ability, a desire to make a difference, and enthusiasm for new experiences. Many students, like my son, even find a passion for something that launches their college course of study.”--Jill Gurak, mother of Connor Mulligan

“As parents of two students that have participated in the IB program (2014 and 2017 grads), my wife and I have witnessed first-hand many facets of the IB program. There is the demanding nature of the coursework and associated workload and the extra effort (extreme at times) that it takes to succeed. There is the occasional student heartbreak that is accompanied by setbacks, tough choices and struggles. But there is also the student’s individual growth and pride that only come from achievements gained as a result of personal commitment and hard work. And there is significant bonding, camaraderie, new friendships formed, and certainly plenty of good fun enjoyed by all that engage and participate! From a parent perspective that is a joy to see.”--Don and Julie Sargent, parents of Caroline Sargent