

The International Baccalaureate: 'Cadillac' of College-Prep Programs

By John Gehring

If senior year is for slacking off, counting down until Beach Week, and reveling in the long-awaited privileges that come with reigning atop the high school food chain, somebody forgot to tell Gabe Mandujano.

An 18-year-old senior at Richard Montgomery High School in Montgomery County, Md., Mr. Mandujano is taking a differential-equations calculus course, writing a 4,000-word history paper on communications between President Lincoln and Gen. George B. McClellan during the Civil War, and stocking up college credit.

In his spare time, he plays trombone for classical and jazz ensembles, hosts an exchange student from Hong Kong, and volunteers for a legal-advocacy group representing the homeless.

So much for a senior slide.

"I wanted to continue to be challenged and be in an environment where everyone else wanted to be challenged," said Mr. Mandujano, who has turned down an offer from Harvard University and will instead pursue a dual-degree program in international studies and economics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Along with a growing number of other students in the United States and around the world, he found that challenge in high school through the International Baccalaureate program. For three decades, the Geneva-based program has combined an exacting curriculum with a holistic philosophy of education that promotes intercultural understanding in 946 schools in 102 countries.

Richard Montgomery High School went through the complicated application process to become an IB school 16 years ago. Like other applicants, the magnet school had to submit a detailed application to the International Baccalaureate Organization, have its teachers specially trained, and undergo multiple site visits.

Today, the school has two years of pre-IB preparation for 9th and 10th graders before they begin the junior- and senior-year curriculum. Like IB schools worldwide, students also take a "Theory of Knowledge" course that pushes them to think more critically about the foundations of learning and their own assumptions about the world.

Every year, Richard Montgomery High ranks among the best IB schools measured by the size of its program and the more than 90 percent of students earning International Baccalaureate diplomas. This year, the school had a whopping 900 applicants for 100 seats in the program.

"There is a prestige factor," said Charlotte Boucher, who coordinates the IB program at the 1,700-student school. "Higher education is becoming more aware of IB programs. They know it is shorthand for rigor."

Rapid Growth

The International Baccalaureate remains a relatively small program and less widely known than the Advanced Placement program sponsored by the College Board. But a growing number of high-achieving students have chosen the IB route for a comprehensive approach to education that teachers, students, and principals say helps mold well-rounded students better prepared for a world that globalization shrinks more and more every day.

For years, international schools, which serve a diverse pool of students globally, had been longing for a common curriculum and a diploma that mobile students could use worldwide.

The IB diploma program began in 1968 with some half-dozen private schools, such as the United Nations International School in New York City. By the early 1980s, the program had spread and caught on in the public school system. Today, nearly 90 percent of the IB-diploma-granting schools in the United States and Canada are public schools.

High schools offering IB-diploma tracks in the United States have grown from about 50 in the early 1980s to 350 today. The program offers a diploma for high school juniors and seniors, along with more recently formed primary programs for students ages 3 to 12 and a middle-years track for students in 6th through 10th grades.

High school students who want to earn the program's diploma must pass exams in English, or their own native language, a foreign language, mathematics, science, social science, and an elective course in another social science or the arts. In addition, diploma seekers must write an extended essay on the topic of their choice and complete 150 hours of community service.

Some 3,400 IB examiners worldwide evaluate students' work. Each year, about 80 percent of the candidates earn the IB diploma.

Paul Campbell, the associate director of IB programs for the North American region, said schools looking to turn around a culture of poor achievement, as well as already-strong schools hoping to burnish their reputations, generally apply for the program. The process can sometimes take up to two years.