

The Approach to Sage
Or: How to Maximize Your Experience of The Sage School Curriculum

The Benefits & Opportunities of a Sage School Experience

- Students will leave us with a sense of self, community, place, and meaning (or purpose or connection)
- In effect, the very questions needed for a good college admission process (who are you, what are you interested in) are the questions we ask our kids to reflect the day they apply to our school and every day thereafter
- The opportunity to do 12 Independent Studies in high school
- The opportunity to individualize portions of their curriculum--from Ind. Study to Community Action to Human Ecology
- A trimester spent working with a counselor on college applications
- A trimester spent working on test prep
- A range of skills beyond tests: students will make videos, produce documentaries, create pamphlets for non-profits, give speeches to local governments, etc
- Teachers and a college counselor who know the student, and the family, deeply
- The opportunity, starting in 6th grade and continuing through 12th, to develop, under close leadership of a caring faculty, the academic, cognitive, social, and emotional skills for success
- A college trip as part of our field studies
- Letters of recommendation from teachers who know the kids
- In 9th-12th grade: at least 240 hours of service
- In 9th-12th grade: 1/2 a year (20 weeks) engaged in field study experiences from Buhl to Ecuador
- The opportunity, as 12th graders, to design a 175 hour personal field study and 4 week academic study of a topic of their choosing
- A higher academic bar, in terms of number of credits for graduation, than most high schools
- The opportunity, in conjunction with Wood River High or Middle School, or with private organizations to participate in a huge number of after school activities and sports
- All of the above provide a wealth of experiences for students' own knowledge of self, place, and community and which will emerge in their applications

Introduction:

This guide is meant to address a question that is on the minds of many families, including those in The Sage School community: How do students get into the college or university of their choice? I'm reminded of an anecdote told by the author and management guru Jim Collins, who, when seeking advice from a mentor while a professor at Stanford Business School, was told: "It occurs to me, Jim, that you spend too much time trying to be interesting. Why don't you invest more time being interested?" The primary advice I have for students seeking college admission is just that: be interested, and pursue your interests with energy, consistency, and good humor. The ability to find an interest, pursue it, and develop skill or competence in it is not just attractive to colleges, but also to employers, friends, and future spouses, too.

Sage School students have consistently sought and gained admission to colleges and universities throughout the country, and our graduates are attending all types of schools--private and public, large and small, liberal arts and specialized.

How Our Students Stand Out in a Crowd

Our students' applications are also distinct because we offer a unique program, and this is a major asset, as the list on our cover page seeks to demonstrate. Just by showing up, students are exposed to a huge range of experiences, opportunities, events, and activities. Our transcript also reflects our values and mission, giving credit for more traditional skills block classes as well as for Field Studies, Wellness, Community Action, and Independent Study.

More than this, however, our curriculum is flexible: within it exist numerous and varied places for students to exercise independence and autonomy in their studies. This document, then, is designed to identify those areas where choice and independence--and therefore distinctiveness--can be maximized by your student in the context of our curriculum.

In a global sense, a major part of our mission is helping adolescents to define and understand their own identities. To the extent that our students gain a deep sense of self-awareness, the processes of choosing, applying to, being accepted by, and succeeding in college are all enhanced. Students who know themselves, their skills, and their interests are better able to choose a school that fits them well. The essays and the letters of recommendation that describe them can be crafted around powerful narrative threads. Students will have distinct and meaningful experiences, skills, and outlooks that will be attractive to a wide variety of schools. Most important of all, students will enter their post-secondary education with an attitude of empowerment and ownership over their learning and educational journey.

Human Ecology

While the curriculum in Human Ecology is most often prescribed in the broad strokes by each band's teachers, smaller (but still consequential) choices are still often given to students. These fall into two broad categories, content and form:

Content: Often a project will be assigned in a broad category but with the specifics left to be determined by a student or group of students. This is a place to exercise choice. To take the winter of 2015 as an example, 10/11 students were assigned a video project on a topic that pertained to life in the American West. An interest in skiing might be pursued by examining the impact of snowmaking or the resort on the surrounding environment. An interest in hunting, or animals, could be pursued through a project on wolves. In the 8/9 band, students in the past created projects for National History Day on the theme Leadership and Legacy in History. They also designed a mural contribution around the theme What's Your Revolution? One student, with an ongoing interest in women's rights, chose to write a historical paper on Amelia Earhart's contributions to women's opportunities in work and society, and then made her mural about the fight for women's rights worldwide. A clear theme emerges.

Form: Often projects can be tailored to individual interests through the form they take--video, writing, visual expression. A common example is video, which students can choose as a project medium within Human Ecology Block most every year of their time at The Sage School. In an academic context, most of these will likely take the form of short documentaries, whether on family history in 6/7, salmon migration or Martin Luther King, Jr. in 8/9, or water rights or Lewis & Clark in 10/11.

Spanish

Similar to our Math program, Spanish at The Sage School, with the Organic World Languages (OWL) methodology that we use, allows students to progress at as fast a pace as their skills and diligence provide. As they work through the American Council of Teacher of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale from Novice Low to Novice Mid, etc, each of these levels appears as a course title on their transcript.

These levels are much more meaningful signals about a student's communicative abilities than traditional letter grades. The amount of growth these students have shown since beginning Spanish at The Sage School will give a true picture of the skills and knowledge they gained from their time in class. We have had numerous reports from alumni in college-level classes who describes themselves as the only students with the confidence to actively speak and use their skills.

Our Spanish curriculum is designed to give even beginning students the confidence to use their Spanish in the real world. In addition to full and active participation in class, students can refine their skills at dinner around town, on vacation, or simply by watching a familiar movie with the Spanish audio track playing.

English & Literacy

Our English and Literacy program (Writing, in common parlance) is designed to help students become effective readers and writers. While student choice in the format of writing assignments or the books chosen to read may be limited, crucial skills are being developed in this time.

College applications are primarily verbal documents. A student's ability to articulate his or her experiences and knowledge in an application essay is a vital component to many applications. Reading, writing, and editing skills are fundamental to success on the standardized tests used by many colleges in their applications.

Math

A student's effort and skills in Math class can be clearly seen in our transcript, as demonstrated by the number of courses that student completes in their time with us. Many selective colleges and universities expect that students will have at least finished pre-Calculus, and more often expect to see pre-Calculus finished by the end of 11th grade. However, this is not at all to discourage those who work at a slower pace in math. The variety of colleges and universities available to our students is vast, and the emphasis they place on an accelerated math progression also varies widely.

Finishing pre-Calculus in 11th grade at The Sage School does allow for a number of exciting possibilities. One is an introduction to Calculus facilitated by our math faculty, which prepares students for entry-level Calculus at the college level. Another is a course on Statistics, which is invaluable to all students, and especially those looking to enter fields in the Sciences or Social Sciences. Finally, there is the possibility of an independent project or internship using applied math, which would allow students to use their skills in a more individualized context. A member of the Class of 2012, for example, designed and constructed a full-size yurt for his applied math project as a 12th-grader.

Community Action

In 9th through 12th grade alone, students will spend 240 hours *in school* participating in community action with various non-profits in our community. As a general rule, students' control over their community action time increases as they grow older, with 12th-graders assuming the most independence in how they choose to spend their hours.

In the younger grades students are being exposed to a the variety of non-profits

and types of community work being done in the Wood River Valley, and can use this long experience to inform what they'd like to pursue when they do get more choice in their Community Action projects. Building a relationship with a non-profit's staff through consistent presence at their site lays the groundwork for deeper collaboration in the future.

Also, students participate each year in the Wow! Students organization's valley wide community service event. Each band picks among proposals by local non-profits, and here again students can continue their work in areas of interest to them. Skills can also be practiced here, such as a video for Higher Ground that a group of 8/9 students made.

Creativity Workshop/Independent Study (IS)

Friday afternoons are undoubtedly the place where the most choice and independence are offered to students at The Sage School. We offer an option called Independent Study. We very intentionally set the bar high for allowing an independent study to run: students must have a clear plan with goals and objectives and a way to demonstrate these; students must have set up both a faculty advisor and an outside mentor who will be responsible for the student and impart valuable skills and knowledge. The payoff, however, is the ability to design your own curriculum for two hours of school every week, and to pursue a topic that is of great interest to you.

While most Independent Studies are pursued on a one trimester basis, the potential exists to develop a project for two or three trimesters, or even over several years. Two hours a week is not enough time to develop true expertise in a topic, but we schedule it on Friday afternoon intentionally to provide a springboard into the weekend, when these items can be pursued at greater length. Even so, a 7th grader who started an independent study project and continued it every trimester until graduation could devote, conservatively, 250 *in-school* hours to it. This does not factor in the 12th grade independent trimester (I. Tri), when students are responsible for designing, on a topic of their choosing, a four-week research period and a five-week field study.

Now, for many students, the idea of discovering your life's passion in 7th grade and pursuing it single-mindedly for six years is unrealistic. However, independent study--identifying a topic, finding and choosing a mentor, organizing a plan of study, figuring out how to present the information, knowledge, and skills you've gained--is also a *set of skills* that can be developed even if one changes one's topic of interest several times. The more practice a student has at these skills, the more prepared she will be for her senior I. Tri, for college, and for life.

Field Studies

Field Studies are the places in the curriculum where students are regularly exposed to experts providing information in their field. This might be plant biologists at the University of Idaho research station in Parma, landscape engineers discussing the Yankee Fork restoration project, authors giving advice in a Writers' Workshop, or curators explaining their choices in an art museum.

Here again is a place for students to demonstrate engagement with something that interests them. It is one thing to say in an essay, "I love music," and quite another to say, "I love music, and when I met the former rock critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, we talked about..." Taking the initiative to introduce yourself, exchange contact information, and ask a few questions can yield important benefits.