Life Lessons
Four Ways Holy Spirit Prep’s Culture Prepares Its Students for the Real World
Question 6 of the venerable Baltimore Catechism asks each reader to consider the question, "Why did God make me?" and then supplies the answer: "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next." Holy Spirit Prep is committed to educating students who will graduate prepared both to answer this universal call and to do so in the unique way God has planned for each of them.

To achieve this, HSP has adopted a person-centered, family-oriented educational model starkly different from what most schools provide. This model produces important educational outcomes that, while often intangible, are every bit as real as the grades students receive and the universities they will attend.

Every parent intuitively understands the idea of a "hidden curriculum." **It's those life lessons and habits that kids learn through osmosis rather than instruction.** The hidden curriculum is the reason we worry so much about which movies our kids watch, what they're up to online, which friends they keep, and which boys or girls they date. We remember all too well how things were when we were kids. We recall that many of our teachers inspired us to ask questions during class, at least until the cute girl two desks down rolled her eyes and we stopped. That's the hidden curriculum at work. We thought it would be okay to play football and sing in the choir at the same time, but the hidden curriculum of the popular clique informed us otherwise. It is an unfortunate reality that all too often the hidden curriculum of a school competes with its academic and character goals rather than reinforcing them.

Fortunately, Holy Spirit Prep’s educational model ensures that the classroom curriculum and our school’s culture and climate work together to form students to become the young men and women God calls them to be. Interactions like those described above just don’t seem to happen here at HSP. But there are reasons for that; it’s not just good fortune. Understanding those reasons is crucial to appreciating the true value of a Holy Spirit Prep education.

These reflections will focus particularly on the unquantifiable value of HSP’s Catholic identity, peer groups, smaller size, and teaching faculty. I hope you will take a few extra minutes out of your busy day to read about the wonderful investment you can make in your student’s future.

Yours in Catholic education,
Tommy
Every parent knows that our children (though they might to argue the contrary) experience our love more by the time we give them than by the money we spend on them. Kids know intuitively that time is a parent’s scarcest commodity and, therefore, the most valuable. It’s not enough to tell our kids we love them; we must show them and use a language they understand to do so. That language is time. In the same way, it’s not enough just to tell students their faith is important. Schools must show them faith matters by giving precious time to its cultivation.

Maintaining a strong Catholic identity – Catholic culture is probably a more apt phrase for what HSP provides – begins with offering students compelling Theology courses. I’m very proud of the Upper School’s Theology courses and the devoted faculty who teach them. But Catholic identity must extend beyond mere coursework, the curriculum of the classroom. If it doesn’t, our students will begin to think of their faith in a limited, compartmentalized way, as simply one of many disciplines, like math or art. However, our faith is not one subject among many, it is the subject that contextualizes and imparts meaning to all others. A successful Catholic school, one that produces graduates who remain committed to their faith in college, marriage, and parenthood, must set religious faith apart by fostering a thoroughly Catholic culture. HSP fosters Catholic culture intentionally by promoting what I call the three S’s: Sacraments, Service, and Sincerity. It takes real time to do justice to each of these pillars, and HSP gives that time. As a result, the value of each becomes understood by students, consciously or not.

**Sacraments**

Students in the Upper School celebrate Mass as a community every week. Students might not always appreciate the reason why, and they might even grumble about it. But they realize their school has prioritized Eucharistic worship by giving it so much time. Holy Mass will stand out years later as something people of faith make time for.

Another sacrament we set aside time for is reconciliation. We take a break from class several times a year for all Upper School students to attend a penance service in Holy Spirit Catholic Church. These give students an opportunity to pause, reflect, and receive God’s forgiveness at the start of the year, during Advent, and during Lent. The majority of students take advantage of this, but all students learn the lessons of our stopping for this event: you’re never too busy to let God love you.

Finally, HSP has received a special permission from the Archbishop to confirm students during their sophomore year. We make sure students receiving the sacrament of Confirmation really understand what they are doing and the responsibility it entails. Confirmation at HSP also represents a lovely bookend for the sacramental preparation that begins at the Lower School with 2nd grade First Communion.

**Service**

Our school motto, *Ministrare non ministrari*, illustrates the emphasis HSP places on service. But many schools promote service and even have service requirements. What makes HSP different? It is one thing to say we should give back to our community. It is quite another to proclaim the truth that every human person is made in the image and likeness of God and is entitled by justice to receive our love. Yet that is the lesson taught through HSP’s service clubs and apostolates. We have chosen to organize our school-sponsored service groups around the corporal works of mercy to ensure that our students’ understanding of service goes beyond philanthropy.
The word philanthropy comes from Greek roots that mean “love of humanity.” Christianity is not about loving humanity though; it is about loving human persons, one at a time as children of God. So, whether our students are traveling to Appalachia to build houses that shelter the homeless, to the Atlanta Food Bank to feed the hungry, or to a local nursing home to visit the sick, HSP students are coming face to face with human persons in need and are learning to love them as Christ does.

**Sincerity**

Actions are so important in building trust with young men and women. A school can have all the sacraments and service in the world, but if the grownups don’t practice what they preach to the students, the seeds of faith will ultimately bear forth the fruit of cynicism. The truth of the faith resonates so deeply with our students because they see their teachers living it every day. All students go on retreat every year and, when these occur, their teachers kneel beside them in prayer and many offer personal reflections. Teachers run every service club and apostolate, giving time and talent that goes well beyond the parameters of the subjects they teach. Students who make time for daily Mass before school starts will usually see a few teachers already in St. Joseph’s Oratory when they arrive. The example set by our teachers helps our students visualize what their own faith can look like when they grow up.

Yours in Catholic education,

Tommy
II • PEERS

As an administrator, I spend a lot of time thinking about the value of education. Holy Spirit Prep is a school I believe in, an investment I believe in. However it’s not cheap, and there are a number of good schools in Atlanta. What sets HSP apart and makes it worth the investment? Or, another way to phrase the question, “Why should parents spend more for an HSP education when they could spend less for one somewhere else?”

The way a parent answers this question has everything to do with what she means by education. If education refers exclusively to what happens in the classroom with some homework sprinkled in, then other schools start to look pretty good. After all, students at those schools go to college too. But what do those student do when they get to college? Who are they? Who will they be after college? These are questions Holy Spirit Prep addresses everyday in and out of the classroom.

Part I focused on the second most impactful element of our school culture and climate, HSP’s Catholic identity. This week considers the first: the influence of peers. Nothing in the school environment influences a child more than the students he or she calls friends. And what is influence but another word for education? Good (used in the moral sense) friends are the sine qua non of a school’s culture. If the education a student is receiving from peers is constructive and aligned to our goals, everything else a school does can begin to have impact. If peer influence is destructive, it takes a miracle to turn things around.

I recently found myself in a rather serious conversation with an HSP 9th grader. I asked the young lady if she knew any students at HSP who were into drugs. No, she said. I followed up. Any who abused alcohol or were sexually active? No and no. The second “No,” sounded more like “Ew, gross,” which represents an A+ answer from a high school freshman. At HSP there is a marked absence of the peer behaviors that threaten the moral and emotional health of students, but which are so prevalent at other schools. The student I spoke to experiences this value every day, but didn’t realize it until our conversation made things explicit. She had learned the lesson that, although dangerous behavior might be glamorized in media, it is not the case that, “Everyone’s doing it.”

Peer life at HSP isn’t all, or even mostly, about what not to do. I was reminded of that by an email I received from a high school parent in response to last week’s letter. She wanted to let me know that her daughter loves school because of the caliber of other students. What had set HSP apart?

First, during the fall semester a group of junior boys had spontaneously and without remuneration organized a pancake breakfast for younger students before school. Second, every day during Advent, 20-30 students gathered in the library during afternoon break to sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”

Unlike much of the content we study for classroom exams, moments like these stay with a student and remain instructive throughout life. Simply knowing that some high school students behave in such a positive way galvanizes other students who might otherwise be convinced it’s not cool.
There is no easy way to calculate the value of a peer group. However, I'll offer a few additional thoughts that I hope help.

**Our children spend many more hours with school peers than with us parents.** Social media, to the extent we allow it, only adds to the time disparity. By a student's junior high years, the influence of even the most engaged parents begins to wane. From a practical standpoint, peers become the primary educators.

**A child's imagination needs models to grow around**, models with which the student can identify. If a student never sees other teenagers living lives of joyful virtue, she will have nothing toward which to aspire. She won't even know what the Good Life looks like.

**Even the most conscientious teenager will make bad choices.** When she does, the behavior she observes from her peers will either validate and reinforce that behavior or suggest a better path. If you can discern what behavior is considered normal in a school setting, you know the actions toward which any new student introduced into the school will gravitate. If I add a new student to HSP's Upper School tomorrow, it is more likely that student will sing "O Come, O Come Emanuel" during Advent than get drunk on Mardi Gras.

**Good friends are for life.** Friendships built on core values in a mission-focused setting are much more likely to remain strong after graduation. They have deep roots. During the challenging years of college, HSP grads know they can rely on one another for support and needed perspective.

No discussion on the inestimable value of a peer group is complete so long as it remains abstract. So please forgive me a shout out to just a few of the students whose lives make the point better than my words alone ever could.

- Sarah (12th grade), who throws parties for the students in the extended school program at the Lower School on special occasions.
- Carson (12th grade), whose Girl Scout Gold Award project gathered a dozen HSP students to clean the property of an older woman confined to her home.
- Drew (11th grade), who spearheaded the pancake breakfast mentioned above.
- Kyle (11th grade), who has been picking up younger students to attend early morning workouts for football while he himself can’t even lift due to injury.
- Sabrina (11th grade), whom I see walking arm in arm with new 7th-grader Megan on a daily basis.

The younger students in the Upper School see these students and many others like them every day. The example they set comprises the powerful lesson of peer influence. We are so blessed that the education HSP students receive from the students around them offers so many inspiring examples of how to do the teenage years the right way. That's a priceless value.

Yours in Catholic education,

Tommy
I graduated in a class of 60 students in Wichita, Kansas before heading off to the University of Notre Dame with its 8,000 undergraduates. Did attending a smaller high school make for a harder transition to college? In a way, but let me explain.

A lot of things about college life were unfamiliar to me. The binge drinking was new, as was the hook-up culture - yes, even at Our Lady’s University. The superficiality and fickleness of college friendships also took me by surprise. I watched dorm mates exhibit a chameleon-like ability to change themselves to achieve popularity among equally insecure groups of complete strangers. All this made me feel pretty uncomfortable, and I have to admit, my small, family-oriented school didn’t properly “prepare” me for it.

Like Holy Spirit Prep, my school prepared me instead for responsible decision-making and genuine friendship, and its smaller size forced me to be authentic in my relationships with peers. As a result, I felt out of place in the college social scene. So I left it alone. When I did, I found truly satisfying friendships and pursuits. Granted, I had to look just a bit harder for them because they weren’t hanging out of dorm windows shouting at me as they did during Freshman Orientation. Fortunately, patience is the midwife of success.

Today, I experience a certain disappointment whenever someone tells me they believe a larger school will prepare students better for the bigness of college. Certainly, larger schools can sometimes offer programs a smaller school cannot. Still, bigness itself is not a virtue to tout but a challenge to overcome. Teenagers need to be known, truly known, by the adults and friends in their lives. Unless they believe they are truly known, they will never believe they are fully accepted. Teenagers don’t always desire to be known though, because it can result in uncomfortable transparency or the dreaded “awkwardness.” They’d prefer to share themselves through a Twitter account or Facebook status update, because these media ask nothing in return and don’t call students out for being inauthentic.

Ultimately, a preparatory school such as HSP should not aspire to prepare students simply for college, but for real life. What makes a person successful in real life? Self-knowledge, leadership ability, trust, constancy in friendship, confidence, and a servant’s heart, to name a few. These are all traits a student inherently develops by attending a smaller school, especially when the student remains in the community for several years.

Think about a few examples of those small school moments and the character they build in young men and women:

- “It’s weird here. Everyone knows everything about me.” Hidden lesson: I can’t pretend to be someone I’m not.
- “Michelle and I had a fight. It stinks, cuz we still have three classes together.” Hidden lesson: I can’t run away from challenging relationships.
- “The principal asked me to host a shadowing student today. It’s going to be so awkward! But what was I supposed to do, say no?” Hidden lesson: I guess I have to step up and contribute just like everyone else.

These are just a few of the lessons the culture of a small school teaches students. You can imagine how these lessons might not be learned in the bigness of a larger school. In such an environment, students can more easily pretend to be someone their not; discard normal, challenging friendships.
for new; and only receive the leadership opportunities they proactively seek out.

The hours of my life today are given mostly to two small communities: family and work. I imagine it is the same for most parents reading this letter. Long gone are the college days of 8,000 undergraduates, 400 dorm "friends", a prepaid meal plan, responsibility only to myself, no babies for miles around, and my own opinion driving all my decisions. Long gone is the unreality of college.

That time ended and real life began. Now my friendships are fewer, but truer. My days are harder, but better. I’m so glad my smallish high school prepared me for it. And I’m glad Holy Spirit Prep offers just that preparation for each of its graduates.

Yours in Catholic education,
Tommy

1 N.B. The drawbacks I share about the University of Notre Dame are drawbacks that will be experienced at almost any college and are not intended to prejudice the reader against my alma mater. Rather, we must accept that today, even at Catholic universities, the virtue of our graduates will be severely tested. A successful high school prepares them for this challenge not by exposing them to the same vices ahead of time, but by offering compelling models of a more rewarding lifestyle.
IV • Our Teachers

Millions of teenagers (at other schools, of course) will spend this evening plugging into the social media-sphere. After all, they don’t want to miss anything! They will access multiplayer games via laptops, Twitter via iPads, and Instagram via iPhones. Who are they talking to and reading about? Other teenagers, mostly. Status updates will inform them that “Martin is still watching The Walking Dead,” and “Susan is repainting her nails orange. LOL.” Some of them will pause thoughtfully before endorsing Martin’s update with a “like.” Meanwhile, Susan waits for someone, anyone to notice her. Carefully selected peer pictures will convince them that everyone else is having more fun than they are and spends 75% of their summer at the beach. Just before bed, the news that Justin Bieber has unretired will start trending on Twitter, and they will retweet it.

The relative value of social media is hotly contested, but one truth should be beyond debate. Social media has allowed teenagers to spend more time than ever watching each other’s lives. It’s not just at school. It’s at home and even in the car on the way home! The end result of this is that teenagers spend less and less time observing and engaging the words, actions, and choices of grownups. Whereas we lived in a vertical world, theirs is horizontal. And in a horizontal world, there is no one to look up to.

We parents pray our children will grow up to be mature, responsible, hard-working, faithful adults. However, what models has society provided them for this grand undertaking? If we asked our teenagers to name the adults in their life they most look up to, what would they say? Naturally, we hope they would say mom and dad. But anyone else?

I can’t speak for the millions of teenagers at other schools, but I am quite confident that teenagers at HSP’s Upper School would name their teachers on the first or second ballot. Don’t take my word for it though; try it out! Ask them and I bet you’ll start to hear some familiar names surface: Mr. Radosta, Mrs. Askins, Mr. Reger, Mrs. Rondeau, Dr. Deen, Ms. Stedman, Mr. Cole, Mr. Rosenzweig, and Dr. Schreiber. There are many more names I could mention, but it doesn’t really matter which teacher your student sees as a role model. The point is that, during the day, your son or daughter has connected in a meaningful way with someone who exemplifies what it means to be a mature, responsible, hard-working, faithful adult.

As a parent it’s often hard to know whether our kids are in greater need of our friendship or good, old-fashioned tough love. We err on the side of being a buddy, though, because we are afraid of losing that all important positive relationship. After all, we fret, if they stop looking up to us, whom will they aspire to emulate? This is why it’s so critical for teenagers to have teachers they know and respect personally. The presence of those role models allows us parent to do our job, even when that means administering some tough love. As my son grows up, I expect there will be many times when my high expectations and consistent enforcement of rules earn me poor reviews on Facebook. Perhaps he’ll even “hate” me and my wife at the same time!

When this inevitably happens, I will take solace in my confidence that I have done everything in my power to place him into genuine relationship with awesome adults who share my values and my hopes for his development. His life will be full of models of success: authentic success, not the superficial Hollywood version he is likely to access through Instagram.

This is a letter about the unspoken value of HSP’s faculty. I know I haven’t done enough to extol their respective virtues. They are truly superb men and women who work hard because they love the students.

Even so, the value of HSP’s teachers might not be fully realized until well after graduation when a college junior, at sea in the flotsam and jetsam of university life, looks back and suddenly realizes she’s known all along just what she needed to do to get back on track. She needs to be as passionate as Mr. Radosta, as pleasant as Mrs. Askins, as thorough as Mr. Reger, as earnest as Mrs. Rondeau, as courteous as Dr. Deen, as expert as Ms. Stedman, as wise as Mr. Cole, as inspiring as Mr. Rosenzweig, and as forthright as Dr. Schreiber.

Yours in Catholic education,
Tommy
SOUNDS LIKE THE RIGHT LESSONS.

Learn more about the lessons our students learn - academic and otherwise - on a campus tour, at an Open House, or on the phone with a member of our Admissions team.

Learn how to visit HSP at www.holyspiritprep.org/visit.

Call or text us anytime at 678.761.7992.