

The International Baccalaureate: A Diploma of Quality, Depth and Breadth

by Cliff Sjogren and Paul Campbell

Over the past 30 years, the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB) has quietly matured into one of the most widely available, and arguably one of the best, advanced academic programs available at secondary schools today. It is clearly time for admissions officers and faculties to step back and take a long look at the IB, which has emerged as a reliable indicator of academic promise, perseverance, and social commitment.

Here are the facts: the IB Diploma Programme is a course of study that covers the last two years of secondary school, and culminates in a series of international examinations in various disciplines. Students who participate in the full Diploma Programme are required to study and examine in six different academic subjects. They are also required to fulfill three additional requirements unique to the IB: a critical thinking class known as *Theory of Knowledge*, a 4,000 word piece of original research known as the *Extended Essay*, and a minimum of 150 hours of participation in extracurricular activities and community service known as *Creativity, Action, and Service*. If a student satisfies these central requirements and achieves a cumulative score of 24 points (each exam is graded on a scale of 1 to 7) on the six exams, he or she is awarded the IB Diploma. A student can also choose to take any number of individual IB courses and the subsequent exams; these students are recognized by the awarding of IB Certificates.

While the IB is still often thought of as a "foreign" credential, the two largest IB countries are the United States (406 IB schools) and Canada (89 IB schools). Worldwide, there are over 1,100 schools in 106 countries offering the IB Diploma. These schools come in all shapes and sizes—public, private, small, large, comprehensive, specialized, rural, urban, and suburban.

By all quantitative measures, the IB Diploma Programme continues to grow at an impressive rate. Comparing May 2003 to May 2002, 8 percent more schools worldwide offered

IB exams; 11 percent more students sat for one or more IB exams, and 13 percent more exams were taken. In the U.S., 9 percent more schools offered IB exams; 12 percent more students sat for one or more IB exams; 12 percent more exams were taken, and 10 percent more IB Diplomas were awarded. In Canada, the respective numbers were 5 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent, and 16 percent.¹

Although the IB Diploma curriculum and examinations encompass the last two years of high school, formal preparation may begin as early as the seventh year of a child's education. The academic demands that the program puts on students requires them to have significant exposure to advanced classes (especially in math and foreign language) before they formally enter the IB in their penultimate year of high school. In addition, schools use these "pre-IB" programs to finish as many local, state, provincial, or national requirements as possible.

Behind all this is a Swiss foundation, created in the 1960s to "facilitate the international mobility of students preparing for university by providing schools with a curriculum and diploma recognized by universities around the world."² The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is governed by a sixteen member Council of Foundation, and a director general heads its worldwide staff. The IBO's headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland and primary technical support facilities are in Cardiff, Wales. Besides the IB Diploma, the IBO also offers newer programs for the Middle Years (1992) and the Primary Years (1997). The three programs are different in many ways, but they all share the core IB principles expressed in the organization's mission statement:

¹ Participation figures come from the *North America Statistical Summary*, IB North America, September 2003.

² International Baccalaureate Organization Web site, www.ibo.org

"The International Baccalaureate Organization aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

To this end the IBO works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programs of international education and rigorous assessment.

These programs encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right."³

It is clear from this statement that, while academic rigor is an important given in IB programs, there is also a set of values that the organization strives to integrate into its offerings. Well-prepared IB students move on to postsecondary education with a strong sense of global citizenry, and a willingness to encounter perspectives and cultural norms different than their own.

What Admissions Officers Can Assume About an IB Diploma Student

The IBO operates a network of regional offices and regional representatives, currently located in eleven cities around the world. One of the primary tasks of the regional offices is to assist college admission personnel responsible for evaluating the features of the IB Diploma Programme. In North America (IBNA), offices in New York City and Vancouver are responsible for this task. Towards this end, IBNA has drawn on several prominent admission officials to create the IB North America College and University Recognition Task Force (CURT.) Members now serving on CURT are from Brown University, the College of William and Mary, Columbia University, Macalester College, McGill University, Vanderbilt University, and the Universities of British Columbia, Chicago, Florida, Toronto, Washington, and the former admission head at the Universities of Michigan and Southern California.

Currently, CURT is working with IB school leaders and coordinators to examine ways to better facilitate the movement of IB students into higher education. CURT has developed and endorsed a chart that will provide university admission staffs with guides on how the IB diploma recipient might compare with other applicants in a selective and/or competitive admission environment. Table 1 (on the following page), "IB Diploma Candidates: Some College Admission Assumptions" lists thirteen common student selection criteria that are employed by most selective institutions, and offers suggestions on how the various elements of the IB might be viewed as evaluative tools for the criteria considered in the admission decision.

As you can see from the table, CURT members agree that an applicant who is striving for the IB Diploma personifies

many of the qualities necessary to succeed at college: strong academic skills, positive involvement in community, a willingness to accept challenge, and an ability to think critically.

Besides the endorsement of CURT, what other reassurance does an admissions office have about the quality of the IB applicant? Here are some examples:

■ **IB schools are held to universally high standards—**

Schools that choose to participate in the IB Program must first go through a rigorous self-examination of their academic programs and support services. In the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean, an application for participation in the program is submitted to the IBNA office in New York. After a careful evaluation of the application, IBNA often requires schools to submit additional information to complete the application. A three-person team, selected from among experienced heads of IB schools, IB coordinators and teachers, college admission officers, and IBNA staff, conduct a two-day visit to the school where probable IB teachers, school and district staff, school board members, and prospective IB students and their parents are interviewed. A report is then filed by the visiting team with the IBNA Board of Directors, which in turn submits a recommendation regarding authorization to the director general for a decision. Only schools (known as IB World Schools) that have successfully undergone this authorization process are allowed to offer the IB Diploma Programme. Once approved, schools will be subject to a thorough review of their progress every five years to maintain their eligibility for continued participation in the program.

■ **IB teachers are also held to high standards—**

Central to the school's responsibility to offer IB courses is an in-depth teacher-training requirement, as students will be required to satisfy the requirements of a number of college-level courses. Those courses include the student's first language (English,) a foreign language, natural/physical sciences, social sciences/humanities, mathematics, and the arts. At least three courses will be at the Higher Level, requiring 240 classroom hours in each subject in the final two years of secondary school. Three courses will be taken at the Standard Level, requiring at least 150 classroom hours. All teachers scheduled to teach IB courses must receive IB-specific training. Since the curriculum for each of IB's 35 courses is rewritten every five years, there is an expectation that IB schools will also be committed to the ongoing professional development of their faculties.

■ **No grade inflation—**The IB grading system is criterion-referenced, where each student's performance is measured against well-defined and articulated levels of achievement. These are consistent from one examination session to the next and are applied equally to all schools

³ International Baccalaureate Organization. Geneva, Switzerland, May 2002.

Table 1: IB Diploma Candidates—Some Admission Assumptions

Admission Criterion	These assumptions apply to IB Diploma Candidates
Academic strength of curriculum	An admissions officer can be assured of the candidate's strong preparation of coursework in a cohesive and broad-based curriculum that touches on basic academic areas: native language and literature, second language, social science/humanities, natural/physical sciences, and mathematics.
Grade point average	Nearly all courses in the student's final two years are in solid academic areas. A higher percentage of the courses that constitute the GPA are the kinds of courses most valued in college admissions.
Academic strength of high school	IB authorized schools must offer, support, and maintain a minimum of seven or eight very strong academic departments to be a successful IB school.
High school percentile rank	Regardless of how the HSPR is determined by school, an IB diploma recipient will be in the top 10% of his/her graduating class in readiness for college.
Trend of performance	The IB Diploma Programme requires students to maintain a high level of focus and performance throughout their high school experience.
External validation	Because the IB Diploma, by its examination requirements, validates both achievement and integrity in academic performance, there may be a reduced emphasis placed on standardized tests in the admissions process.
Research and writing skills	The Extended Essay requirement, a 4,000-word research paper crafted under the tutelage of a faculty mentor and evaluated by a team of international readers, ensures students are prepared for postsecondary writing and research requirements.
Accepts educational challenges	Participation in the IB demonstrates that the student accepts, rather than avoids, rigorous academic challenges.
Critical thinking skills	The required Theory of Knowledge course ensures that students become critical thinkers who understand the interdisciplinary nature of learning.
Interview skills	IB students have strong preparation in oral presentation skills. Several IB courses include mandatory oral assessments, and the Theory of Knowledge course requires students to shape their opinions into logical discourse.
Extracurricular involvement	The Creativity, Action, Service (CAS) element requires that the student invest a minimum of 150 hours during the final two years in non-classroom activities.
Recommendations	The IB student will be well known by the IB Diploma Coordinator, Extended Essay mentor, CAS Coordinator, and the IB teachers.
Maturity and responsibility	The IB assists the student in developing time management, goal setting, and other organizational skills.

Note—Admission criteria not influenced by IB participation include: ability to pay; age; alumni, legacy, or staff connections; athletic prowess; ethnicity, gender; geographic representation; political consideration; under- or over-enrolled campus academic program.

throughout the world. The first IB examinations were offered to a handful of international schools in 1971. Since that time, the distribution of grades on IB examinations has remained essentially the same from year to year, with only minor variations. Also, the percentage of IB Diploma candidates earning the diploma has neither dropped nor risen dramatically, even as the program has grown.

- Worldwide recognition**—Universities in more than 110 countries accept IB Diploma holders. The IB Diploma Programme was created in Europe to accommodate families of foreign service personnel and other internationalists who were assigned to another country. An IB Diploma awarded from any participating school qualified the recipient for entrance to most European universities. For similar reasons, the United Nations International School (UNIS) in New York was authorized in 1974 as the first North American school in the program. UNIS was soon followed by the United World College in Victoria, British Columbia, Ashbury College in Ottawa, Washington

International School in the District of Columbia, The Anglo-American School in New York, the French American International School in San Francisco, and the Detroit Country Day School.

- "The Private School Education at the End of the Yellow School Bus Ride"**—This was the description an IBNA board member gave to the IB Diploma Programme in North America, as he saw it emerge from its privileged roots at private schools to become more widely available at public schools. Today, over 85 percent of the schools offering the IB Diploma in the U.S. and Canada are in the public sector.⁴ Several states, among them Florida, California, Colorado, Minnesota, Texas, and South Carolina, have legislated various forms of financial incentives to encourage the IB program at schools. Graduates of Florida high schools who complete the Diploma Programme are awarded substantial scholarships, renewable for three more years if a satisfactory record is achieved, at any in-state public college or university. That strategy has most likely contributed to a reduced migration of Florida students to other states for their continued education.

⁴ Source: International Baccalaureate North America, September 2005

Reports from 18 schools suggest that their IB Diploma Programmes influence the entire academic environment of the school. The Programme gets well-deserved credit for increasing student, teacher, and community pride in their school. Due to its demonstrated quality and its inclusive rather than exclusive nature, the IB diploma tends to “raise the bar” for all students. Because a successful IB school must support a balanced academic program of at least seven or eight strong academic departments, non-IB students also become beneficiaries of the program.

Students report that their primary reason for choosing an IB Program is to better prepare themselves for an academically demanding college or university, and to be awarded credit or waivers for freshman and sophomore level courses. u.s. and Canadian colleges and universities are increasingly recognizing the academic strength of the IB Diploma and

are demonstrating an eagerness to attract those students who are completing this world-class diploma program. Many institutions award special financial awards to attract these young scholars. For a look at the institutional policies on awarding credit for IB courses at hundreds of North American colleges and universities, hopefully including your own, visit the IBO Web site at www.ibo.org, and click on the shortcut to “universities and governments.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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