



Individualized Learning, Strong Student-Teacher Partnerships, and a Deep Sense of Community Contribute to Oxford Students' Stand-Out Successes

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***Fabien Cousteau**, grandson of Jacques Cousteau, is an aquanaut, ocean conservationist, and documentary filmmaker. His Ted Talk, "What I Learned from Spending 31 Days Underwater," has garnered 1.3 million views.*

***Frank Ball** is a graduate of the Pratt School of Architecture and currently works as an architectural designer on the construction of supportive and affordable housing and the conversion of a boutique hotel into a homeless shelter for women.*

These are just some of the remarkable alumni of Oxford Academy who are making significant contributions to their professions and communities.

"What alums share with me is how much Oxford Academy enabled them to nurture their passions, pursue their goals, and achieve success in college and their careers," said Head of School Philip B. Cocchiola.

He attributes these success stories to Oxford's individualized approach to learning. One-to-one, or "accelerated learning," he said, "is the key to unlocking the full potential of every student."

The one-to-one approach at Oxford encourages students to find their voice as partners in their own educational experience and curriculum. "It's the ideal way to learn," said Cocchiola. "Each of our students has a team of educators who are highly skilled in their areas. They match the students' interests with projects, coursework, and reading lists, and develop schedules and test styles according to their learning needs.

"That's why Oxford is so successful. We can demonstrate just how much a young man can accomplish here – it's truly a transformational experience."

Through accelerated learning, students become responsible for their own classwork and progress. "Unlike other schools, you can't hide in the classroom," he explained. "At Oxford, the coursework is based on self-directed learning. The class does not advance unless you are present and active and doing the work you need to do, and it's very engaging and structured so that students must take accountability. Once you graduate from Oxford, you have a skillset that is advantageous because you're comfortable doing what you need to do in the classroom. You're also comfortable building relationships with your professors because you've had that experience.

"One-to-one learning also provides the opportunity for students to accelerate in some areas and spend more time in others. When they can move at a pace that is appropriate for them, they become motivated to push themselves harder than they normally would."

Teachers Making the Difference

Cocchiola credits the school's educators for individualizing the entire curriculum, which takes time, dedication, and innovation. They create customized curricula and lessons targeted to each individual learner, taking into account struggles with attention, executive function, and learning differences. With the flexibility of one-to-one learning, teachers can create new approaches to coursework that is challenging for students.

For example, a former student who now works for a major sports franchise was able to create his own "company" at Oxford to help him understand math concepts. Prior to coming to Oxford, said Cocchiola, "he was told he was a poor math student, but the reality is he didn't connect to the way it was being taught." The teacher took the concepts and learning goals of the student's math class and focused them on the task of running a professional sports franchise. Together, they created a hypothetical sports team in which they calculated salaries and determined what it cost to run a stadium and concession stands. To help the student improve in English, he wrote marketing proposals for the franchise.

"We embrace the idea that every individual learns differently. A student's ability to think differently or look at problems differently is celebrated here, whereas previously it was seen as a negative," he said. "What others see as problems, our students see as opportunities that lead to solutions. This is one of the greatest strengths they take with them when they graduate."

One of Oxford's biggest differentiators, he added, "is the fact that faculty and staff stay here for a long time. While that's beneficial for the school, I think it's also a testament to the transformational experience that not only the students have but the teachers have as well. They love the fact they can make a difference, and our students have teachers who grow with them."

Cocchiola is also proud to point out that 100 percent of their students are accepted into college. The school's director of college guidance works with students and their families to offer support and information, to help them find the school that is the best fit, and to help navigate the college admissions process. Oxford graduates attend colleges across the country and around the world, and have built successful careers as entrepreneurs, lawyers, artists, teachers, therapists, environmental activists, software engineers, pilots, and more.

The Importance of Community Service, Leadership, and Diversity

Cocchiola joined the faculty at Oxford in 1998 and was appointed head of school in 2010. He held several positions on campus, including social studies teacher, dormitory supervisor, department chair, and dean of students. Community service has long been one of his personal and professional priorities. His motto by Winston Churchill holds true to the example he sets for his students: "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."

He is a former board member of the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools as well as a participating member of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, the National Association of Independent Schools, the Boy Scouts of America, The Association of Boarding Schools, and the Independent Educational Consultants Association. He also serves as a board member for the

Westbrook Park and Recreation Department and is co-chair of the Westbrook Division of the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce.

Cocchiola strives to inspire his students to give back to the community. With volunteer work an integral part of the Oxford experience, students have the opportunity to join Oxford Nation – a weekly philanthropic club in which they partner with teachers to volunteer in the community and raise funds for national organizations. The annual Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Service Run raises money for Afghanistan refugees, while other initiatives include blood drives, reading to elementary school children, and cleaning the beaches.

Developing leadership skills is also a priority. The school's Character and Leadership Curriculum (CLC) is delivered in a seminar-style format in which students meet weekly to explore topics focused on skill development. This includes goal setting, self-regulation skills, self-care, navigating relationships, problem-solving skills, and increasing self-awareness.

The CLC fosters honest and respectful communication among students, with the goal of creating an environment where they feel actively responsible for creating a positive atmosphere.

Building a community of respect is enhanced by the school's culture of diversity. Students come to Oxford from 25 states, and more than 30 percent come from 17 countries. "We have this incredibly diverse group of boys who come together, are respectful of one another, and are interested in finding out about the different cultures that are represented here," said Cocchiola. "We spend a lot of time building on those relationships and learning about the challenges and hardships that some students face in their home states or countries."

He pointed out that because many students have not experienced the same level of need that some of their peers have dealt with, it's an opportunity for them to develop a deeper level of understanding and empathy.

Continuing to Build a Community of Learning and Team Building

Going forward, Cocchiola is focused on several new initiatives at the school. A priority over the past year was to respond to the overwhelming data about young people struggling with mental health challenges in today's world. The school recently hired a full-time clinician to work with students to help them understand and communicate their problems or concerns, especially feelings of depression or anxiety. "We want students to know they are in a safe environment in which they can share their emotions. We want them to be able to reach out to us with any difficulties they are facing," he said.

Cocchiola sees the school's location near the ocean as advantageous to enhancing mental and physical health, as well as developing team building skills. The school offers several marine courses, with a boat-building program currently under development. He explained the program would not just be about building and maintaining a boat, but teaching seamanship and what it takes to become certified.

He said the school is also expanding its CLC program to further help students prepare for life after Oxford. Once a week, they meet with various members of the administration and faculty to discuss topics that pertain to college life and exploring different career paths.

Asked about the most rewarding part of this job, Cocchiola said it's helping to make a difference in the lives of students every day and connecting with alumni on a regular basis.

"I think that's one of the main reasons we are so successful at fundraising because our alumni are more than grateful for their time here and want to get involved to help the school," he said. "They share with me not only their own personal experiences and where they are in their lives today, but just how much the school did for them."

Project-based Learning (PBL) in Oxford Academy

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