



ISP

By Tracey O'Shaughnessy

The photographs in this article are from a series of a paper sculptures created by **Nam-Anh Nguyen '15** for her ISP project this spring.

SAM LAMY '14

“ignite

STUDENTS' MINDS AND PASSIONS”

In their last year at Taft, Robert Brown '14 and Dawson Jones '14 were able to accomplish a musical feat neither had attempted before—record their own music on their own instruments using Taft's new recording studio. The pair was able to do so because they availed themselves of a 50-year-old program that gave them the time and encouragement to take on a project that they otherwise would not have had the time or assistance to do.

Jones and Brown were part of the school's Independent Studies Program (ISP), the first in the country to allow innovative, scholastically advanced students to pursue a project of their own interest with the rigor, time and discipline often expected of college students. The students are exempted from their afternoon projects to allow them time to accomplish their objectives.

“I've been writing music since seventh grade, but working in the studio has totally opened up my songwriting” said Jones. “It's definitely not easy.”

The ISP, said Brown, who will attend Georgetown University in the fall, “required a lot of motivation. It's for people who want to have something special on their Taft record. It's definitely for people who have a passion that they want to fulfill.”

The idea that the ISP, which began largely by encouraging students to write scholarly papers, would have morphed into a program that sanctions and even encourages projects like music, website design, poetry, ceramic arts and dance, would have been unimaginable to its creators in 1964. But it fits within the impetus for the program: to ignite students' minds and passions.

“The program is amorphous by design,” said Ken Hincker, who became adviser for the program last year. “It allows students to pursue a passion that has either a specific scholastic, artistic or service component.” Students then seek out a faculty member with the requisite experience and expertise to help guide them in their pursuit. The yearlong program emphasizes that the process is the most important element in the project, Hincker said, adding that students learn not only about a specific topic but also learn how to manage their time efficiently.

Each year, about 20 students are accepted into the ISP, about half of the number who apply. Typically, only uppermids and seniors are accepted.

Student projects—displayed or performed—conclude in early spring before A.P. exams begin. Outstanding independent work is recognized at a special awards assembly at the end of the year for uppermiddles or at graduation for seniors. More than 1,000 projects, from still-life-painting to alternative energy exploration, have been completed since 1964.

“This is entirely done for the sake of learning,” Hincker said. “No credit, no grade. The payoff, if there is one, is that it's a really wonderful thing to have on your college application and something incredibly empowering.”

Indeed, said Brown, one of the most important lessons for him has been learning to manage his time. “It's important to have that passion,” he said “But it's important to have the perspective and determination. It can be taxing. There are no grades. It's all up to you to see how hard you want to push yourself.”

This year's projects were varied and ambitious. Some took



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on engineering and design work (one student designed a photovoltaic cell, while another made a harpsichord). Others leaned toward artistic projects (one student created clay sculptures of the characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, another wrote and produced a one-act play). Other students took a more academic approach to their projects, including one who wrote a paper on how Winston Churchill's childhood affected his political decisions.

"I would be too self-congratulatory if I said the program works because of the way the school prizes the life of the mind," said Hincker. "But I think it has an awful lot to do with it. We tend to get some really interested, committed and free-thinking individuals. In an era when more and more efficiency, effectiveness and payoff matters, we are continuing to bring in students where being a student is their *raison d'être*. I would tip my hat to those folks."

At the time of its implementation, the Independent Studies Program was a groundbreaking initiative unique in independent schools. The idea was to harness the surfeit of intellectual curiosity that was fomenting in the minds of Taft students, but, in the minds of its designers, had very little avenue of expression.

"They were so inventive that it was embarrassing to realize that they had this pent-up ability," said Barclay Johnson '53, an emeritus English teacher who advised the ISP for 40 years.

Arriving at the school in 1963, Headmaster John C. Esty, who had been a dean at Amherst College, believed that private school students were disadvantaged by their lack of freedom in academic study. He believed a program that would allow

students to pursue scholarly interests about which they were passionate would better prepare them for college.

Esty, now 85 and living in Concord, Massachusetts, recalled how revolutionary the idea was. "I remember the faculty meeting where I announced that that's what we were going to do. Several faculty voices said, 'Well that's crazy. The students won't do the work.' So my answer to that was 'Let's try it.'"

One faculty member who was encouraged by the idea was Lance Odden, who succeeded Esty as headmaster.

Odden, who then taught East Asian and United States history, also believed that many of his more intellectually agile and restless students needed to exercise their scholarly gifts in a venue that did not fit into the then-rigid strictures of academics.

"The old world was very teacher-centered, very didactic and very textbook-bound," said Odden. "It was 'Here are the facts, learn them and regurgitate them.'"

Odden and his colleagues began working on the ISP that fall and were thrilled by the results. "They were absolutely phenomenal," he said.

One of the first students to benefit from the program was Arthur Waldron '66, now the Lauder Professor of International Relations and Chinese History at the University of Pennsylvania, "ISP was the making of my time at Taft," he wrote via email. "I felt I was breathing intellectual oxygen. I am, however, someone who for some reason has an inborn intellectual agenda. That is required for ISP."

Ellis Wasson '66, a historian at the University of Delaware who has written more than six books, largely about British



Charlotte Anrig '14 Short stories, essays and poetry

Natasha Batten '15 Gender in *C. elegans*

Maggie Blatz '15 *Busboys* (novella)

Rob Brown '14 and Dawson Jones '14 Music

Tiffany Bushka '15 and Jocelyn Kim '15 Ceramics

Fernando Fernandez '14 Short stories for Spanish Speakers

Hannah Kim '14 The Rhino Rialto: Web Marketplace

Penn Naviroj '15 Volleyball Translation Book

imperialism and the Whig Party in 19th century, was another early participant who credits the ISP with his decision to become a scholar in history.

"I learned a lot about using primary sources, organizing large amounts of material, and writing," he wrote, adding that those skills were invaluable when he got to Johns Hopkins, where he was able to accelerate his history program into a simultaneous B.A./M.A. and then to go on to a Ph.D. at Cambridge. "Had the ISP program not existed, things might have turned out differently," he said.

"The ISP opened intellectual windows, broke up the routine of school, gave me time to read deeply in a really complicated subject for the first time, and the opportunity to work one on one with a mentor. It was Odden and [Walter] Foley who made me want to do history, but ISP gave me the chance to road test the idea and confirm my passion in life," Wasson said.

The initial ISP program looked far different than it did today. Participants—about 24 boys a year in those days—lived on a special dormitory floor, listened to outside speakers, had class-cutting and campus-leaving privileges, and typically ate together.

One boy studied the effects of pesticides. Another looked at the religious issues in the poetry of Dylan Thomas; still another looked at the march of the Cheyenne Indians from the Dakotas to Oklahoma; and still another was testing 32 types of fertilizer in a soil microbiology project. David Armstrong '65, who went on to a career as painter, did an ISP under the supervision of Mark Potter '48.



Nam Anh Nguyen '15 Light Installations
 Maria Ossa '15 Perspective
 So Young Park '14 Experiments in Interior Design
 Mia Polokoff '15 Family Tree
 Tommy Robertshaw '14 American Poetry Revisited
 Sam Stamas '14 The Taft School Staff: *Seeing Eye to Eye* (video)
 Gabby Vachon '15 Dove Self-Esteem Project
 Claudia Villalona '15 Exploring Spanish Art and Literature
 Athena Wilkinson '15 Writing in the Recording Studio

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As the first program of its type, the ISP generated national interest. The *Independent School Bulletin* published an article on the program by Odden in 1966, and in 1967, the National Association of Independent Schools put out a booklet by David Mallery titled *A New Look at the Senior Year*, of which the Taft program is the opening chapter. In the program's fourth year, Taft had already received visitors from more than 40 schools interested in starting similar programs.

In its early years, independent study projects were mostly academic papers (bound copies of which still live in the school archives), but that changed in the 1970s. Barclay Johnson '53, who took over the program in 1970, said the program evolved with the times. In the late '60s and early '70s, he said, the school was struggling to be relevant to students who were concerned about social unrest and the Vietnam conflict.

“We were, in those days, very self-conscious about getting through to students,” he said. “They were all anxious about the war. They were worried for their own safety, and they were worried about getting through college. They had to suffer the stigma of being the little rich kids, and they had to grow up fast because they were certainly on the bull's eye of criticism.”

The ISP, he said, “gave the kids some kind of place to speak out and something creative to do because they weren't satisfied with the academic fare of the average school.”

Increasingly, the arts became a vital part of the ISP. “The dancing was extraordinary,” said Johnson. “We also had a lot of musical projects, both vocal and instrumental.” Students—then as now—were interested in film and studio art.

There were bumps, of course, he said. “We have had to kick some kids out of the program because they didn't have the discipline they said they would have.... It was school. It was not camp.”

Odden believes the Independent Studies Program was a precursor to the more student-centered method of learning favored in most schools today.

“Education has moved to the teacher no longer being the fact-giver, but to being the coach of kids who are learning on their own. So what we did back then is an absolute precursor to what's going on today,” Odden said.

“An ISP happens at odd times, at the juncture of unplanned connections and shifting plans,” Hincker reflected at the final ISP showcase in the faculty room in May. “So you write some there, you screen your last few scenes here. You overindulge in poetry late into a Thursday night or you find yourself late for an appointment because you fell into the beauty of the natural world that only data—in its implacable certitude—reveals. ISP isn't an act; it's an attitude. We set ourselves private study projects to find out what we can, and might someday, become, thus taking part in the age-old task: know thyself. And we celebrate the apparently paradoxical purpose of solo scholarship: learn for yourself that your knowledge may in turn serve another.” ■

Tracey O'Shaughnessy is associate features editor at the *Waterbury Republican-American*.



Sam Stamas '14 received the David Edward Goldberg Award for Independent Work for *Seeing Eye to Eye*, his 30-minute documentary about the staff at the Taft School. You can watch it here: vimeo.com/96214141