IB Is Something I Never Expected I Would End Up Doing

by Madison Dodd, NewGate Student

I have always pursued alternative education, whether that be through Montessori, Waldorf, or homeschool. Therefore, it was a shock to me to think that I would be involved in a program so widely recognized across all types of schools. I remember my first day touring NewGate School as a high school freshman. I met with Tim Seldin, who showed me around campus and encouraged me to give the IB Diploma Program a shot once my junior year came, to which I replied, "But I can't do math!" (to which he replied, "Just do an IB Certificate!").

I did not expect how much I was going to push myself over the course of these two years. I wasn't aware of how much I was truly capable of. I remember the first day of our science (Biology HL) class, our teacher told us there was going to be a 'learning curve' and that we should prepare ourselves to not always get A's on our test like we may be accustomed to. Although my classmates and I took in this information, it didn't quite set in until we all studied for one of our first big tests We thought it was our best work yet, but then we realized that we all just scored in the '2-3 range' ... out of 7!

Suddenly, our teachers were no longer there to give us all the tools to get a good grade in the class, to make sure our homework was done on time, or to make sure we were present for the lessons. By IB's design, the weight was now put on us, as the students, and it was time to get to work.

WHAT IS IB?

In a nutshell, IB is a two-year diploma or certificate program that is internationally recognized across universities to award college credit. That means that from junior to senior year, you will be in the same classes preparing for (depending on your course) between two to three final exams that will be scored from 1 to 7 in each subject. These courses will be three higher level (HL) courses and three standard level (SL) courses. The difference simply being that a HL course may have some extra requirements that SL students don't have to complete.

Along with the end-of-year exams, there is the Internal Assessment that you must complete in each IB course. In Biology, that might look like a science experiment that you write a paper about. In Literature and Performance, you adapt a short story or poem into a play. The teachers grade it and then send it off to IB to be assessed by them.

In addition to your coursework, you must complete the Extended Essay (EE), which is a 4000-word research paper that is situated in one of your six IB courses. Then, there is the additional class you must take called "Theory of Knowledge" or "TOK." This is essentially a philosophy class, and the only two requirements for it are that you complete:

- One TOK essay using one of IB's supplied prompts
- A TOK presentation in which you develop your own research question and explore it using a real-world example

All of these go towards your final IB score, which can be up to 45 points. I promise this will all begin to make more sense once you are in the course.

Finally, at the heart of IB's program, there is CAS (Creativity, Action, and Service). This is something you complete outside of school and, most of the time, you are already doing it. Do you play a sport or an instrument? If so, the action and creativity boxes are already checked off.

The only requirement for CAS is that you create a portfolio containing reflections about these activities throughout your two years (mine is in the form of a blog) and that you complete one CAS project, which can involve one or all of the CAS components, and is at least six weeks long. While this does not go towards your score, you will not receive your diploma if you do not complete it.

Overall, IB takes a global approach by looking at big ideas across disciplines. You will notice yourself finding connections between something you learned in science class with something you are talking about in Spanish. No matter what you're studying, students dig deep into subjects and try to find answers.

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WHAT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO COMMIT TO ALL THAT EXTRA COURSEWORK?

For whatever reason, if a student does not want to do the full IB Diploma, they can take up to three IB courses; they only need to complete what is required in that course. That means no CAS, no EE, and no TOK. This represents the difference between the higher level and the standard level requirements in the courses. This is beneficial for a student who might have a tighter schedule and doesn't have time for the full diploma or has a subject area they do not want to take at such an intensive level.

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MY EXPERIENCE

IB is usually perceived as a big, scary, and difficult program that only those suited for ivy leagues can survive. However, through my experience, I have learned that it is not the skills that you enter the program with that matter; rather, it is the skills you will acquire throughout the program that will carry you to the exams.

I did not think, at the beginning of my junior year, that I would be leading a discussion in my social and cultural anthropology class about hegemony in marginalized groups in East Harlem. I also did not think I would ever receive a 90 percent on a math test, but it happened! For me, IB has been a journey full of self-discovery and lots and lots of struggling. However, my own academic struggles have taught me so much about who I am and what I am capable of.

I did not enter the program feeling that I was someone who was even remotely able to tackle all of these requirements. However, by putting in the work, learning how to manage my time, and not get in the way of myself, I'm able to positively reflect on it now. I can't speak for every school, but at NewGate the support system from the teachers and students is something I attribute to why I entered IB in the first place. Therefore, I encourage anyone considering the program to try it. Your name is not even registered as an IB student until late in your senior year, meaning you have time to see if the program works for you and adapt accordingly.

Looking back, all the stress tears I cried, the coffee I consumed, and nights I stayed up were all formative in enabling me to believe in myself. Even though I am not at the finish line, it is now in my line of sight, and I am sprinting towards it faster than I ever have before, with my teachers and family cheering me on until I arrive. ■

Madison Dodd is a high school senior in the IB Diploma Program attending NewGate School. She lives in Sarasota, Florida with her parents and younger brother.