



Photos courtesy of The Mountain School, Vershire, Vermont.

Semester Schools: Supporting Student Leave without Sacrificing Revenue

**THREE SUSTAINABLE METHODS
FOR REPLACING LOST TUITION,
GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES
AND HELPING STUDENTS BECOME
CONFIDENT, MATURE LEADERS.**

BY DAN O'BRIEN AND SALLY LEIN

Newark Academy (NA) is a school on the move. Not content with its already outstanding reputation, the institution's newly renovated campus augments a thriving international baccalaureate program. It has also moved beyond merely talking about what a 21st century education will mean. Indeed, the Livingston, New Jersey-based

school has taken learning beyond classrooms and into spheres where students are collaborating, communicating, imagining, adapting, persisting, demonstrating empathy and taking risks.

How did NA do this? Five years ago, the school introduced a new immersion graduation requirement. In order to receive a diploma, NA students have to either travel abroad, participate in an extended service or wilderness program, or spend a semester at one of seven independently operated semester schools approved by NA.

"The trick was first to discern the educational quality of the respective programs and then to figure out how to manage our relationships with them," says Rich DiBianca, principal of Newark Academy Upper School. "More and more of our students want to take part in our approved semester schools. They are good for our kids, and they are good for our school."



College admissions officers share similar perspectives. Says Greg Buckles, director of admissions and financial aid at Middlebury College, “Middlebury matriculants who have attended semester schools during high school are confident, mature learners. They know how to communicate, collaborate, think creatively and problem-solve. These students are aware of a world that is greater than themselves, whether through their knowledge of the environment or issues facing our government or the developing world.”

The question DiBianca and his business office at Newark Academy faced in setting up relationships with these programs is one confronting independent schools across the country. Schools that want to support students with semester schools do not charge tuition for the semester students are away. Marc Bogursky, director of business and finance at The Blake School in Minneapolis, explains, “We’re willing to take the financial ‘hit’ in support of these very meaningful, and in some cases, life-changing, experiences for our students. We recognize that as great a school as Blake is, we cannot provide the same opportunities that semester/year-away programs can. And, we are committed to providing our kids with the best educational opportunities we can.”

“Fortunately, it’s easy to make this model sustainable,” explains Pam Clarke, who has sent students to semester schools in her role as head of four independent schools. “Schools just have to choose a way that works for them.”

Transformative Outcomes

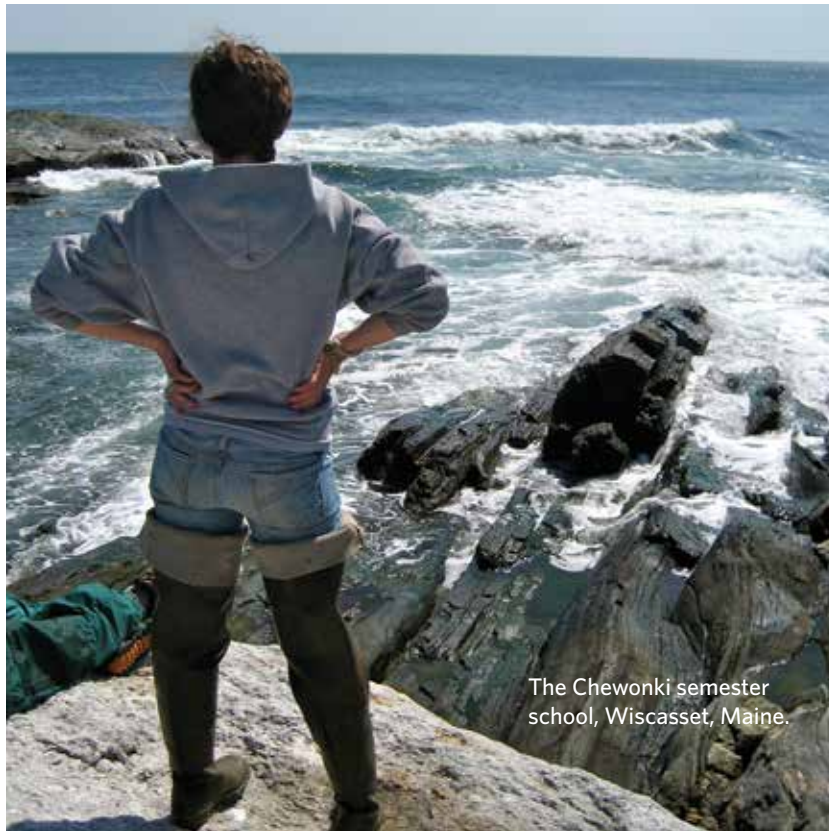
Business officers who have yet to confront this challenge soon will. Semester schools, bolstered by the transformative outcomes they offer, are growing in popularity. Since their origins 30 years ago, more than a dozen semester schools have helped thousands of public and independent school students across the country develop vital skills for 21st century success.

These schools specialize in student-centered classes, intentional communities and hands-on learning opportunities that thrust students into real roles as problem solvers, leaders and inquisitive learners.

Among other opportunities, students grow their own food on working organic farms at Milton Academy’s Mountain

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—Marc Bogursky, The Blake School



The Chewonki semester school, Wiscasset, Maine.

School and the Chewonki Semester School. They contribute to professional scientific research projects at The Island School in The Bahamas. At the High Mountain Institute in Colorado, students explore the wilds of the Rocky Mountains and the canyons of southeastern Utah while building leadership skills, confidence and persistence.

For the more policy motivated, students are exposed to leading political figures and the issues they confront at the School for Ethics and Global Leadership (SEGL) in Washington, D.C. They study urban issues at CITYterm, a division of The Masters School, in New York.

With all of these options, it can be a challenge to find the appropriate programs for your school. Almost all institutions manage the flow of students on leave by working with a small selection of semester schools.

Concord Academy, in Massachusetts, works “with semester schools that help us perpetuate our mission and provide an academic experience similar to CA,” says David Rost, dean of students and community life at the 9–12 school. “We also want to provide our students with a diverse range of options. The student who will thrive while studying organic farming in Maine might not find the same inspiration in New York City.”

“I recommend schools select between two and four semester schools with which to partner that strengthen areas of focus for their schools,” says Molly Barnes, former head of the High Mountain Institute. “For instance, schools that emphasize globalization might choose to work with SEGL. On the other hand, we (HMI) are a great fit for institutions that

highlight their commitment to leadership and sustainability.”

At the same time, schools need to plan strategically to meet budget demands while making semester schools available to families. In independent schools, the task of developing such policies often falls to business officers. “We realized quickly that we’d have to take a comprehensive approach to this issue,” explains Pam Hemphill, business officer at Greensboro Day School in North Carolina.

Although customization exists at every institution, there are three main ways schools manage student leaves for study away.

Mid-year Additions

One way to replace tuition lost when students attend a semester school or otherwise take a leave is with revenue gained through occasional mid-year enrollments. This is a tactic favored by schools that are either short of full enrollment or cannot count on filling vacated seats.

Archie Douglas, interim head at Pennsylvania’s Upland Country Day School and former head of two other schools, explains that even “final” budgeting is understood to be flexible. For example, since most institutions don’t budget for new students coming on board in the middle of the school year, these additions—which occur almost every year—yield unanticipated revenue. “Each year, several students would come to us after we had completed our fiscal year budgeting—late in the spring or after the start of school in the fall,” he explains. “The tuition revenue these students brought with them more than compensated for the tuition we did not receive while a few of our students were away at semester schools. Thus, I learned not to panic at the prospect of losing a couple of semesters of tuition.”

Douglas favors this revenue-neutral approach. “Budgets, no matter how carefully prepared, are still really just plans...and there are always going to be surprises. As long as we set limits in advance on the number who can go, I think it is the right thing to support students who want to attend these programs, and we should try not to penalize them. The key for us was to find a way to do all that while staying within our budget goals. This approach—substituting mid-year admits for students who left us for a semester—allowed us to fund our priorities and do the right thing for students and the school.”

Leave Caps

Another approach is deceptively simple. Pam Clarke explains: “The painless way to manage these semester leaves is to place a cap on the number of students your school will allow to go away. Grow a culture that ensures that number, whether it is two, four or eight students, remains consistent each year. Remind budget writers that six students on leave is the equivalent of three full-year tuitions.”

Schools that use this approach project total enrollment minus the number of students who will be away at semester schools. However, because these institutions know that number up front, their budgets already account for the leaves.



THE SEMESTER SCHOOLS NETWORK

▶ **Chewonki:** Wiscasset, Maine

✓ Work on an organic farm, complete wilderness trips, study marine science.

▶ **CITYterm:** Dobbs Ferry, New York

✓ Explore NYC and urban issues while based on The Masters School campus.

▶ **Coastal Studies for Girls:** Freeport, Maine

✓ Study marine science in an all-female environment.

▶ **Conserve School:** Land O’ Lakes, Wisconsin

✓ Study sustainability and experience the Wisconsin wilderness.

▶ **High Mountain Institute:** Leadville, Colorado

✓ Hike Colorado peaks and Utah canyons, develop leadership skills and grit.

▶ **The Island School:** Eleuthera, The Bahamas

✓ Research marine science, SCUBA dive, kayak expedition.

▶ **The Mountain School:** Vershire, Vermont

✓ Work on an organic farm with maple sugaring.

▶ **Ocean Classroom:** Eastern Seaboard

✓ Sail the U.S. eastern seaboard aboard traditional tall ship schooners.

▶ **The Outdoor Academy:** Pisgah Forest, North Carolina

✓ Practice sustainability and wilderness skills in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

▶ **Oxbow School:** Napa, California

✓ Engage in an intensive studio arts curriculum.

▶ **The School for Ethics and Global Leadership:**

Washington, D.C.

✓ Study international policy and political case studies with capital leaders.

▶ **The Traveling School:** Bozeman, Montana

✓ Discover international cultures and landscapes in an all-female environment.

▶ **Woolman Semester:** Nevada City, California

✓ Weave together spirituality, peace, sustainability and social action.



High Mountain Institute,
Leadville, Colorado

For example, “Rather than planning on having 362 students in an upper school, create a budget for 360, knowing four students will be away at a semester school,” explains Clarke.

Many schools embrace this approach because they see that supporting students in attending semester schools provides a competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace, bringing new students to the school and adding to overall enrollment. Newark Academy, for example, prominently features semester-away opportunities for students on its website. “Prospective families will ask us if we offer any options for students to study away from Lakeside,” says Booth Kyle, assistant head of school and director of admissions & financial aid at Seattle’s Lakeside School. “We can point these families in the direction of the study-away programs with which we work.”

Independent day and boarding schools benefit by creating tuition remission policies for student leaves, and incorporating these policies into their annual financial budgeting and planning.

Enrollment Management

A third way to manage student leaves is for a school to overenroll a grade level or entire division by the number of students it allows to attend off-campus programs. Independent schools with hard enrollment caps and the luxury of full enrollment and dependable wait lists often take this approach, as do boarding schools, where empty dorm beds are notable and costly.

The Blake School employs a version of the overenrollment approach. “Almost all our students studying off-campus are in upper school, where we have more flexible enrollment targets,” explains Marc Bogursky. “In a given year, we usually have between 10 and 14 students studying at semester schools. This is the equivalent of five to seven full-year students not enrolled at Blake. Given this situation, we sometimes enroll additional upper school students to help us meet our net tuition revenue goals for the year.”

Some schools, especially boarding institutions, take an even more comprehensive approach, working with affiliated semester schools to ensure an equal number of students will be away from school each semester. The semester schools then offer that number of spots to qualified applicants. Under this model, students who were away from school in the fall take the places of students who leave for semester schools in

the spring. New students take the place for the full school year.

An added bonus of this approach is that overenrollment provides insurance for the inevitable attrition that schools experience. Each fall, when semester school students return full strength to start their senior years, the new students added to compensate for them during junior year also cover any students lost to attrition.

Schools can apply this model even when 11th grade is not a traditional entry point. Added students, whether in ninth or 11th grade classes, allow these schools to offer semester options to students in a revenue-neutral manner while protecting against unavoidable attrition. Explains Alanna Brown, business officer at Colorado Academy, “We believe in the advantage semester programs offer our students. Semester programs provide transformative programming that would otherwise be impossible for us to provide in-house. We see the impacts in our community immediately upon a student’s return and know that such opportunities are invaluable.”

New approaches to semester schools are always on the horizon. Families have more educational options available than ever before. Enrollment management is constantly evolving, and creative structures are needed to survive. Not only does access to semester schools help schools differentiate themselves, but it greatly enriches the lives of the students

who participate. Independent day and boarding schools benefit by creating tuition remission policies for student leaves, and incorporating these policies into their annual financial budgeting and planning.

Pam Clarke sums it all up. “The main reason to allow your students to go to a semester school is that their experience will be life-transforming and will reflect very well on them and on your school. There are few opportunities to change the course of adolescence for the better, and a semester school is one prominent opportunity.” ■

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He previously worked at HMI on the history faculty and as director of admissions. Prior to joining HMI in his current role he was with Greensboro Day School in Greensboro, North Carolina.



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