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Head of Upper School

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Dear Upper School Parents:

With the fall term fast approaching, I still have vivid images of early June: the truly memorable commencement ceremony, exam week, and the emotional final Chapel, run well by this year's student leaders, Sarah Werner and Travis Hutchinson, in which different students eloquently and poignantly spoke about departing faculty members. Sitting here today, I continue to be awed by the commitment of the many people at Poly to our students' well-being. Therefore, for an education to be valuable, students need learning experiences that rouse their imagination and give them opportunities to discover their deepest and most enduring interests. I believe the faculty has explicitly acted on and incorporated this essential notion, as they have crafted curricular and community goals that help students learn to live with ambiguity and to create meaning, what Emily Dickinson metaphorically labels "the Art": "The Province of the Saved/ Should be the Art - To save -/ Through Skill obtained in Themselves..." (#539)

Recently, I have been inspired by hearing about the diversity of the wide-ranging and adventurous plans of students, traveling to such places as France, Turkmenistan, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, South Africa, Haiti (just to name a few), participating in local and international community service projects, conducting science research or other study programs, pursuing athletic interests, working in dramatic and visual arts' workshops, and much more. This attention to a global awareness and connection represents how students are adapting well to the rapid changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On a related note, I just finished Tony Wagner's *The Global Achievement Gap* (2008). As the director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Wagner has researched new ventures in national and international education. This book comes as the result of his extensive fieldwork visiting schools throughout the world. He recommends that we look closely at our educational practices—how we incorporate new ideas and methods into our teaching—so we can ensure our curriculum keeps pace with what he characterizes as "three fundamental transformations."

1. rapid evolution of the new global 'knowledge economy,' with profound effects on the world of work;
2. sudden and dramatic shift from information that is limited in terms of amount and availability to information characterized by flux and glut; and
3. increasing impact of media and technology on how young people learn and relate to the world—and to each other.

Therefore, the type of skills students will need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be successful—teaming/collaborating, global thinking, communicating effectively, and making ethical and empathetic decisions—become more crucial in how we design Poly's curriculum.

For this 2010-11 academic year, I want all students to make a commitment to be accountable to intellectual power and character. Because the word accountability implies a story (to give an account is to narrate what has happened), there is the implication the account will include some cause and effect, that the listener will be able to make sense of events. A second meaning has financial overtones, accounting, with its accompanying responsibility. We want to guide students to become aware of themselves as both scholars and moral agents. Of equal importance is one's ability to give an account, primarily to oneself, but also to others, of the progress, or lack of it, in one's work. It is in establishing and maintaining honest relationships that students grow in character and confidence.

In their learning, it is important students focus on how they may grow in intellectual power. They will need to strive to see through all the particulars of their academic work, that what is at stake is their ability to discern what is good, what is beautiful, and what is fitting in the use of the powers of human reason. Also, they can discover the creative power of words, numbers, lines, colors, and sounds, especially when these devices of intellect are directed by clear and precise ideas. Finally, they need to keep in mind the importance of good judgment, remaining as objective as possible. I want students to treat learning at Poly with the utmost seriousness, as they look to uncover evidence and to engage in a process of respectful dialogue and listening. Through such efforts they can raise the intellectual power in whatever forum or special gathering they participate.

From an equally important perspective, they need to learn how moral sensitivity embodies character, what Seneca, the Roman philosopher, implies: "As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters." In the year ahead, there will be many opportunities for students to take responsibility for their actions. I hope you will work closely with the faculty to explain, defend, and enforce a code of civilized and civilizing behavior, which is clarified in the Handbook and emphasized

in Poly's **Honor Code** (available at [www.polyprep.org/podium/default.aspx?t=112925](http://www.polyprep.org/podium/default.aspx?t=112925)), the heart of Poly's mission. Also, our students must understand that no code is complete until it is embodied in the advice and actions of those it defines. Often, a problem can arise from just reading rules and guidelines from such handbooks: they tell us what not to do without really describing the *why*, the reasons for not doing certain things. Therefore, please take some time this summer to talk with your children about these issues, to address why one *ought* to think and act ethically. I look forward to working together to help set up clear and attainable expectations around such rules and behavior, as I have found students more appropriately learn from their own mistakes if they understand expectations are consistently maintained and enforced with a spirit of concern and justice.

It remains our commitment that teaching at Poly is challenging and revitalizing, but also ennobling. Poly remains a community filled with hope. Thus, we want students to struggle with problems that exist in such communities, because relationships are at the core of any genuine educational experience. And in that effort, students may best understand the importance in life of a duty higher than self-interest, as represented well in these words from William Wordsworth: "that best portion of a good man's life/ His little, nameless, unremembered acts/ Of kindness and love." ("Tintern Abbey"). Ultimately, it will be in how we embrace differences, renew consistently high standards of learning, and emphasize the necessity of shared values that we will find what is best in Poly's community.

I wish you well over the rest of the summer, and I look forward to another exciting and rewarding year.

Sincerely,

William R. Cox