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Alpha Program proves tougher than expected

By Caitlyn Kolakowski

Getting into a selective enrollment school, like Lane, is a triumph in itself, but for a select few they receive an invitation to be a part of the Alpha program as well.

Only about 55 students were selected out of the class of '11, about 105 students from the '12 class, and about 85 for the class of '13.

For Alpha students many difficulties come with the honor of being accepted.

"I was told it was just about science fair but it is a lot more than that. We have more AP classes that are mandatory," said Sarah Hanses, Div. 266, "I also think that high school in general turned out harder than we thought."

"I found it to be a lot more challenging than I originally thought it would be. I didn't expect us to spend so much time on science fair and not only that, but I didn't realize how hard we'd have to work on each part of it," said Fatima Sabanovic, Div. 278, "I didn't expect there to be an experiment, board, and 30 page paper. I didn't think science fair would be taken as seriously as it is."

In addition, students in the program, find it hard to balance the science fair with other classes in the curriculum.

"It is hard when it is science fair time and you have an AP US History folder due. Then you have to stay up all night long and it's not right that you can text people at four in the morning because you know they are up," said Hanses.

"I remember pulling many all nighters during the school year just to get all my work done," said Joanna Buksa, Div. 171, "Basically if you are in Alpha, you are going to be sleep deprived most of your time, especially around deadlines because they come really fast."

The small class sizes that the Alpha Program consists of also prove to be a disadvantage for students due to the cohort component of Alpha. These cohort classes mean that students of the program go to their english, science, and math classes all together everyday. This set up encourages these students in the same program to work together.

"You don't get to meet many new people because you have the same kids in most of the classes, and you can not really take electives because you have to stick with the alpha classes," said Buksa.

"One of the disadvantages is that you see the same people and you basically only have two different classes," said Hanses, "You know everyone. We are missing out on the high school experience."

On the other hand, students admit the advantages of these rigorous classes as well.

"The advantage of the Alpha program is that we get to work together to solve problems," said Saad Khan, Div. 261, "And also we are learning through experience."

"I like that it looks good for college and I like how close you become with all the other Alpha students," said Sabanovic.

"You learn a lot and become closer with your teachers," said Hanses.

"Doing the science fair looks really good on your transcripts and if you do well on your science fair, you may qualify for many scholarships and money prizes," said Buksa.

Although there was an old Alpha program that was around before this new program it had been discontinued in the year of 06/07 because enrollment went down.

The new Alpha program, similar to the old one but different as well, was started three years ago by Dr. Dignam. It is an “intensive honors program focusing on science fair, mathematics, technical reading and writing, engineering, and technology,” according to the description Dignam posted on Lane’s website.

However, along with students, teachers also acknowledge the demand the program has on students.

“Students are not prepared for this kind of rigorous program in elementary school,” said Mr. Lanfair, Alpha freshmen biology teacher, “They get a lot of expectations at such a high level of education.”

“There is more responsibility,” said Mr. Kopack. “Besides doing the [science] project, they have to complete the honors curriculum. I would actually call it honors plus.”

“For freshmen, they need to pick their science project and if it is good enough they need to stick with it for the next three years,” said Ms. Feuer, the English teacher for sophomore and then freshmen students for the old Alpha program, “Freshmen year is overwhelming enough anyway.”

Teachers not only find that there are difficulties for students but there are difficulties for teachers as well.

“It is difficult to coordinate with other staff members in the program,” said Mr. Lanfair, “Students get frustrated because they get different expectations from teachers.”

For Ms. Feuer the lengthy science papers were the hardest part about the program.

“I am not a science person. I did terribly in my science classes,” said Feuer, “I struggled through reading those papers. It was not exciting to read them.”

Despite all the difficulties students face, teachers do what they can to make it more manageable.

“I try to break up the [science] project but I still have students who procrastinate until the last minute, making it harder on themselves,” said Mr. Lanfair.

In addition to pointing out the difficult aspects of being in Alpha, the staff identifies the advantages for students.

“There is rigor and college prep in this program. It helps to develop their research, analytical thinking, and working independently,” said Feuer, “For kids who want to continue in science through college, the excellent advantage is that scholarships are granted to those that continue on in science fair.”

“[Students] will gain study skills and preparation for college,” said Mr. Lanfair. “They will have more success in high school and learn time management early.”

To some teachers, the program does not seem to have disadvantages.

“I don’t know that there are disadvantages to the program,” said Ms. Feuer, “I think that overall students need to challenge themselves more.”

This difficult program has led some to believe that there are many students who drop out over time. However, the reality is that the drop out rate is very low.

“There is not a senior level of Alpha which looks like the program decreases by that time but is actually doesn’t,” said Dr. Dignam, “Of course [the program has] students not performing well, same as AP and Honors.”

Students acknowledge the fact that they do not have any plans to drop out of the program.

“You hold yourself to a standard and you do not want to be the one who drops out,” said Hanses.

"I feel like I've already spent a year doing it, might as well finish what I started," said Sabanovic, "On top of that, freshmen year is the hardest. The first year you create your foundation and the rest, you just build off of it. So I think each year, it'll get a little easier."

Furthermore, the Alpha program is a component that is a unique opportunity to only Lane students.

"Lane is the only school in the area that has an Alpha program," said Dr. Dignam.

However, Lane is working with other suburban schools with similar programs.

"In the suburbs the science program is not called Alpha. They call it the STEM program which stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math," said Kopack.

This collaboration is to help better the programs in these schools, some of which include Niles West and Niles North.

Overall, Dr. Dignam acknowledges that program is hard but the outcome for students is positive in many ways.

"This is a rigorous program but the goal is to make the student feel successful," said Dr. Dignam.