

asian fortune news

October 2008

Wheaton High School's IGCS shapes a global world for its diverse student body

By: Melissa Muenz

At first Wheaton High School's newest academy sounds like a riddle. What do digital music, foreign language and social studies have in common? They're all selling points for the

Institute for Global and Cultural Studies (IGCS), one of four curriculum choices that Wheaton High School students have when they enter the ninth grade.

Incoming freshmen must choose from four academies: Biosciences and Health Professions, Engineering, Information Technology and the more recently formed IGCS academy. According to Wheaton High School Principal Kevin Lowndes, the

IGCS was formed to balance out the other, more science-oriented academies, also referred to at Wheaton as "pathways."



IGCS students with the Deputy Ambassador of England, who visited Wheaton last year as a guest speaker

"We have not been able to find a national humanities pathway, so we have created our own here," Lowndes said. Among other focuses, the IGCS includes the option of digital art and music classes in its curriculum.

"We didn't have a humanities one, and we didn't have one that included arts," Lowndes said. "The school was becoming very science tech, and I just thought we needed a balance."

A big part of that balance is creating a global focus for Wheaton's students. According to Jae Hwang, teacher and *director* of IGCS at Wheaton high school, IGCS was created so that students could develop a global citizenship.

"It's pretty simple," Hwang said. "I mean we're trying to condense it down. It's a program to prepare students for leadership in our global society."

IGCS helps create this global experience through classes, speakers, field trips and other resources. One example of this type of opportunity is a partnership with a school in Romania, which allows students from both countries to hold video conferences where they discuss issues such as foreign policy, environmental issues and other topics affecting young people. Hwang said that facilitating opportunities like this is an important part of his job.

"My job is to coordinate resources that fit our need for this global perspective," he said.

The push for this aspect of IGCS is in part due to the diverse make up of students at Wheaton. Wheaton High School's student body is made up of 56 percent hispanic students, 25 percent African American students, ten percent Asian American students and less than ten percent white students. IGCS strives to emphasize that this variety is reflected in our world.



Wheaton senior Oscar Portillo learns to write in Chinese during his visit to China.

"It's a perfect place for students to understand that there is a diverse background."

Wheaton senior Oscar Portillo said that his natural interest in languages and other cultures is what led him to IGCS.

"I like other cultures in general," Portillo said. "When I was a kid, I used to watch Japanese cartoons - anime - that's how I got interested in Asian cultures, and everything related, languages especially."

Wheaton allowed Portillo to experience Asian culture first hand when he took a summer trip to China with a science teacher.

"We went to learn about the problems China is having in the environment, and how they are working to solve them, especially water pollution," Portillo said. Portillo went with five other schools to hear professors from Beijing University talk about these issues.

Portillo said that ideally in his future career, he would like to work in international relations or with other cultures in some way. He said that IGCS has allowed him to learn about these interests in a special way.

"The academy opens your mind and makes you more like a world citizen," Portillo said. "I think that I couldn't have gotten this from another academy."

IGCS also focuses on preparing Wheaton students for college through advance placement (AP) courses and partnerships with Montgomery College and the

University of Maryland, Baltimore County.



Wheaton students experiment with the school's new Mac-Media Lab, used by students for digital art and digital music classes.

"The schools allow them to take free classes while they're still in high school," Hwang said. "This will be a part of their college transcript."

This opportunity, along with the high

participation of minorities in AP classes, is part of Wheaton's larger goal to prepare students for future success.

"The idea is to get them a taste of college in high school, so that when they go to college it's not a shock, the rigor of the courses," Principal Lowndes said. Lowndes said that all of the academies strive for this goal. "Our focus here at the school is to make kids college ready," he said.

With all of these goals in mind, sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint one mission statement for IGCS.

"We're having a hard time because we're encompassing pretty much anything and everything that has to do with culture," Hwang said.

Despite the vagaries of the IGCS, the academy system in general seems to be working.

"We really saw our student achievement improve when the students were in an academy," Lowndes said. "The students came in on the same level, and then we looked and more of the students that were in the academies found that the pathways were leading them to AP classes."