Oliosophy: Step up!


During a recent visit to Los Angeles I met an old colleague for coffee. She's an experienced adolescent and family psychologist with a national reputation as a no-nonsense, savvy, data-driven clinician. She makes me a little nervous. As we sipped our coffee, the conversation turned to Oliverian. "So is your school somewhere between a treatment program and a traditional boarding school?"

"Well, I don’t know if we’re exactly in-between treatment and traditional settings," I said, "but we’re definitely an alternative to both."

"So then are you a step-down program?" she asked.

So-called "step downs" are generally less intensive, less restrictive versions of treatment programs. Like treatment, most step downs have level systems, a high degree of structure and supervision, and lots of scheduled therapy. Many bear more resemblance to an adolescent treatment program than to the everyday life of a young adult. In this respect, step-down programs can be past, rather than future, oriented. Even the step-down moniker implies that the goal is to ease students "down," presumably to a state resembling the one they were in preceding whatever crisis required treatment. If you think about it, that state was likely, "on your way to needing treatment."

After reflecting on all of this for a moment I said, "no, I don't think that Oliverian is a step down."

"Then, are you a traditional boarding school but with a little more support?" she asked.
I swirled my coffee and thought for a moment before answering. "No, we're not really that either."

Despite a lot of language around college preparation, traditional schools, like step downs, tend to resemble what's behind more than what's ahead. Conformity and compliance are, arguably, important skills for children to learn and are central components of most primary-school curricula.

Unfortunately, these values continue to rule the day at most traditional high schools. A friend of mine who spent over a decade employed by one of the most competitive prep schools in the country recently compared his time there to his tenure in the U.S. Army, "only the school's expectations of conformity were more rigidly enforced."

Successful young adulthood requires a strong if evolving sense of personal identity, comfort navigating ambiguous situations, the ability to work independently and interdependently, critical thinking skills, a functional ethical compass, and other higher-order social, psychological, and cognitive abilities. Looking backward and stepping down hardly seem like ideal preparation for young adulthood. Instead, educating emerging adults requires a decidedly onward and upward orientation; it requires stepping up, not stepping down.

"I don't know that a term exists to precisely describe Oliverian; so to coin one, I'd say that we're a 'step up' school," I said. "We provide experiences that resemble those of college and young adulthood. This means providing students with an enormous amount of support to replace the structure they're so accustomed so that we can begin entrusting them with a relatively high degree of independence."

My colleague tilted her head to the side and squinched her eyebrows at me, "Developmentally, that seems sensible. So, why doesn't everyone do it that way?"

My hunch is that it's much easier and less scary to offer adolescents what they, and we, are used to rather than to change things up right when they are getting all weird and surly. Our reaction to the developmental shifts of adolescence, in fact, is often to double down on our efforts to control, treating teens more like the children they were than the young adults they're becoming. Adolescence is scary and messy and, quite frankly, dangerous. Doing anything that might compound all that developmental volatility might seem, at best, ill advised. Instinctually, we want to contain these wild, gangly things who are developmentally wired for risk and exploration and freedom and other things that scare us to death.

"I think it's just a hard approach to pull off," I told my friend.

For one thing, this approach requires a level of support that most schools simply can't muster. It also requires a level of student independence that most schools aren't willing to risk. A step-up must provide enough room for students to make meaningful mistakes but enough adult engagement to safely learn from those mistakes. This can't be achieved without an approach that's more akin to parenting than it is to typical
classroom teaching or talk therapy. It requires a very high staff to student ratio—in our case, 1 faculty member (living on campus!) for approximately every 1.5 students—and a willingness to trade the comfort of structure for the rewards (and risks) of guided independence.

Ironically, a step-up approach does not work so well with extremely compliant students who are just fine coloring inside the lines, thank you very much. Less surprisingly, perhaps, it also does not work well with extremely non-compliant students who have not yet embraced a path of personal growth. It works best with students who are sensitive, quirky, and (intentionally or not) unconventional; students who are acquainted with struggle but not in the throes of crisis. It's these 'in-between' students who are the most receptive to adult connection and the most aware of their own need to change. It's these students who sort-of-mostly-pretty-much-kind-of-really-really-really want to step up to a bigger, better life.

But it's not only students that are challenged to step up in a setting like Oliverian. This is difficult work. It requires a faculty that is willing to assume a burden of worry, perplexity, and profound engagement. It requires inexhaustible vision, absurd optimism, and the ability to see magnificent possibility where others see only failure. In short, it requires love.

"You know, it takes a special person to love a teenager," I said to my friend, "and that's the foundation of everything we do at this weird little school. Love. We really love these kids."

"Wow," she said. "Do you really use that word, I mean, professionally?" my friend asked.

"Well, I just did."

I braced a little, expecting her to chide me for crossing some sort of clinical or educational boundary with soft, non-clinical language. Instead she put her coffee cup on the table and smiled at me. "That is so cool," she said.

And that it is.

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At Home in the World
Three Seniors Build Confidence Overseas

Three Oliverian seniors return from international intersession trips invigorated and ready to take on their final semester in high school. Jake Giardina, Elle Wiberg, and Celeste Cox have experienced their own challenges in high school, grown through these lessons at Oliverian, and are now
ready to move on to college and create their own place in the world.

**Jake Giardina ’16** left the US for the first time on our Italy Intersession trip. He admits that while he may have been out of his comfort zone at first, he soon felt right at home in Italy. Jake specifically appreciated the rich history of the Vatican and Rome. After Italy, Jake received an invitation to attend University of Iowa next year. Jake says this is a huge relief and he finally feels ready to go college! Jake said he needed the extra support Oliverian offers—especially when he first arrived two years ago: "Oliverian is designed to really support you. It’s okay to make mistakes here, but you grow and learn from them rather than feeling miserable about yourself and making things worse. The school helps you get on your feet and teaches you how to move on with life. Right when you get comfortable, they ease up on the support, and leave you more on your own. Then everything shifts. People shifted away from telling me what to do, so I had to rely more on self-motivation. I began to feel more confident in myself. Oliverian really prepares you for life. I feel ready to keep my life up and moving; if I do screw up again, I know it isn’t the end of the world. I can move on from it. I have more confidence now, and no longer do just the minimum to get by in life. I am ready to make my life work."

**Elle Wiberg ’16**

was also on the Italy intersession trip. While she has been to Italy before, this trip was quite different than travelling with her family. Elle said that she was allowed to explore at her own pace, "Oliworld has helped alter my view of other people, the world, and everyone’s relation to their world. While everyone has their perspective of the world, we really are all basically the same. This world is not as big as I used to think. I’m not alone anymore; wherever I go in the world, I no longer feel alone. Oliverian has helped shift my thinking. And that is really, really good."

Like Elle, **Celeste Cox ’16** has traveled extensively, but her intersession trip to Honduras was a different experience. Celeste says her group did "a lot" of physical labor and helped people that normally don’t have access to healthcare. "We hosted a dental/medical clinic, put in a new tile floor in a kindergarten classroom, and helped paint one of the local schools," she said. "It was a lot of tough work, and at the beginning of the trip we felt pretty foreign, but by the end of the week we felt right at home!" Now that Celeste is back on campus for her final semester of high school she is working hard to complete applications to Barnard, Vassar, Middlebury, and Skidmore.

Good luck to all of our Oliverian seniors. We are grateful to be part of your personal stories as you forge ahead and make your own history.
Please visit our Facebook page to view pictures from 2016 intersession trips.

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**Work Hard, Play Hard**

*Oliverian's Antidote to College Essay Procrastination*

![Photo of students and children] Jack Eatherly and Teddy Herrick at play with the Weiss kids

College essay writing is a daunting rite of passage for most high school students and the source of much agony and procrastination. To combat this essay-writing malaise, we broke our seniors into small groups and invited these groups to work on their college applications in the comfort of faculty homes. This approach provided students with an essay guru at their fingertips in a relaxed and supportive environment. Seniors fortunate enough to work from the Betsy and Micah Weiss household capped off their hard work with a "dress-up and dance" party with all the Weiss kids. Work hard, play hard—Oliverian style!

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**There is no other school like Oliverian in the world.**

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