



A consideration

**of the value of earning an
International Baccalaureate Diploma**

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Note: As “programme” is the standard spelling for the International Baccalaureate Organization, an effort has been made to conform with that standard, except in the case where a source has been cited and the spelling is “program”.

The goal of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) is to educate “the whole person” (Tarc 2009:17) by nurturing inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. The IBO (a non- profit organization with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland) offers three programmes of international education from grades pre-K to 12. The original and most popular, International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), provides students an international education that allows them to earn a diploma that will be accepted for the purposes of admission at universities worldwide. High schools who wish to become a IB Diploma granting school must complete a rigorous process for acceptance. High school students enrolled in the IBDP must successfully complete a demanding and challenging two year course of study and score well on exams to earn their IB Diploma. This paper will consider whether the perceived value of an IB Diploma, as championed by the IBO, corresponds to the actual value of earning an IB Diploma and a U.S. student’s opportunities for college admission.

In the 1920’s and 30’s, as national leaders began the first steps towards global cooperation after World War I, the concept of an international education grew from the desire to bring nations together (a goal of the new League of Nations) by broadening and deepening the way young people thought about their cultures, their histories, and themselves (Mathews and Hill 2005:5). The idea of an international education was stalled by World War II, but later was spurred by the post war need of diplomats,

business executives, and technicians involved in the process of reconstruction to provide their children with a rigorous high school curriculum that would be accepted at universities around the globe (Taylor and Porath 2006). After many years of research and fund sourcing by a group of English, French and American educators, trial IBDP exams were offered in 7 European schools in 1968 (Bunnell 2011).

Today, the IBDP requires junior and senior year high school students to study six subjects chosen from six groups: studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, experimental sciences, mathematics and computer science, and the arts (which is optional, a student may choose a subject from another group). Three of the six subjects are studied at a higher level totaling 240 teaching hours and three subjects are studied at a standard level totaling 150 teaching hours. Students must also complete an Extended Essay (EE) which is an independent, self-directed piece of research, culminating in a 4,000-word paper. They must follow a Theory of Knowledge (TOK) course which is a seminar-type course that explores the links between IB subject area courses. It spans the junior and senior years and students must complete a minimum of 100 hours of instruction. Students must fulfill an oral presentation requirement and write a reflective paper to successfully complete the TOK course. Students must also participate in Creativity, Action, Service (CAS) and document 150 hours of after-school activities which occur during their junior and senior years. The activities can be split among creative, action, and service oriented endeavors or a single overarching project. Students will discuss their personal growth through a culminating project upon completion of the 150 hour requirement (IBO 2005-2011).

Students take written examinations consisting of essays, structured problems, short-response questions, data-response questions, text-response questions, case-study questions and multiple-choice questions for each of their 6 subjects at the end of the programme, which are graded (on a 7 point scale) by external IB examiners. Students also complete assessment tasks in school consisting of oral work in languages, fieldwork in geography, laboratory work in the sciences, investigations in mathematics, and artistic performances. These assessments are initially graded by teachers and then reviewed by external moderators. The IB Diploma is awarded to students who earn at least 24 total points, subject to certain minimum levels of performance across the whole programme (including all exams, the EE and the TOK course) and upon satisfactory completion of the CAS requirement. The highest total that a Diploma Programme student can be awarded is 45 points. Students may also choose to take individual IBDP courses and are able to receive an IB Certificate noting the courses they took and the marks they earned (IBO 2005-2011).

The IBDP has become very popular in the United States. In 1990 there were under 20,000 students enrolled in the IBDP growing to over 100,000 students enrolled in the IBDP in 2010 (IBO 2005-2011). How is this success explained? Tarc suggests it is because the IBO is a dynamic organization that has a significant and growing media presence in education policy and curriculum reform because it has developed a strong corporate identity which is enhanced by an effective branding effort. It is successful at reaching out to train teachers outside of the IB programme. It stays relevant as guided by research which pays attention to changing economic conditions and shifts in governments and societies. Its programme reflects varying school reforms and evolving

cultural tastes which enhance the IBDP's desirability. The growth of the IBDP can also be attributed to post 9/11 entreaties for "globalization" and the response of schools to these demands (2009).

The popularity of the IBDP in the United States corresponds to a higher percentage of college acceptance of the IB Diploma (over Advance Placement (AP) courses and IB Certificates) and the desire of students to be granted acceptance into higher tier institutions. "Of [IB]DP students (domestic and international) who attend college in the US, most enroll directly in somewhat selective or more selective four-year institutions, and generally graduate at higher rates than the institutional averages" (IBO 2011). The assumption that an IB Diploma student has a better chance of being admitted to a higher tier institution is a valid one. In an interview with Kim Lund, the IB Coordinator for Dexter High School in Dexter, Michigan, she stated that, "The IBDP is considered the most rigorous curriculum in the [United] States." According to a University of Michigan Admissions Counselor the "IB Diploma is considered equal to successful completion of six AP courses and 4 years of a foreign language" (Lund 2011). This information is important when considering the method in which students apply for college; the Common Application (Common App). Today, the Common App (in use since 1975) has 456 member institutions in the U.S., France, Germany, Italy, Scotland, and Switzerland that accept it for undergraduate college admission. For the 2010-2011 academic year a coursework box was included on page two of the School Report form (which is filled out on behalf of the student by their school counselor) which asks how many IB, AP and Honors courses are offered at the student's high school and how many of these courses the student is permitted to take. Counselors are required to

indicate whether the student is an IB Diploma candidate and to compare the applicant's course selection with other college preparatory students at the school by choosing "most demanding", "very demanding", "demanding", "average", or "below average" (The Common Application, Inc. 2011). If a student is an IB Diploma candidate they will be rated by their counselor as taking the "most demanding" course selection, affording the student a better opportunity of college acceptance (Lund 2011).

This collegial enthusiasm for the IBDP began in 1973 when Cliff Sjogren, then University of Michigan Director of Admissions (and chair of the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Educational Credentials) was asked by the IBO Executive Director to assist in getting the IB Diploma recognized by the University of Michigan. Sjogren sent the IBDP course outlines to select University of Michigan faculty and was surprised to hear from them that not only would they recognize the IBDP for credit, but that the University of Michigan should start actively recruiting IB Diploma students. Later Sjogren sent a letter to 86 international schools around the world which said in part: "The best predictor of academic success at Michigan is previous academic performance. Student's who elect to satisfy the standards of a rigorous and demanding academic program in high school are the ones best suited to benefit from the intellectual environment of the University. A transcript that reveals a student's enrollment in International Baccalaureate courses serves notice to the admissions officer that the applicant is someone who accepts rather than avoids educational challenges. [. . .] Above average grades in a very good school are looked at more favorably than superior grades at a mediocre school. Unquestionably, a school that graduates each year a number of students with International Baccalaureate diplomas has demonstrated its

commitment to high educational standards and that commitment will serve to influence admissions decisions at the University of Michigan” (Mathews and Hill 2005:120). By 1975, “IB diploma-holders were entering the best universities such as Harvard and Oxford [which] meant that the programme’s content and standards were more attractive to interested schools” (Hill 2010:118).

To assess the postsecondary results of students who experienced IB in some way, whether by completing the full IBDP or by earning IB Certificates, the IBO requested data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) on college enrollments and degrees earned by all IB students who completed high school in the United States in 2000 and 2001. The goal of the request was to determine whether the IBO’s goal of providing rigorous preparation for college is validated by high college attendance and completion rates. College enrollment and graduation rates were tracked for two types of IB students: 11,653 certificate candidates and 12,834 diploma candidates. An analysis of the data revealed that a total of 71 percent of the IB students were enrolled in college and that the majority of these students attended selective colleges and universities. Though the proportion of students attending more selective colleges and universities was not significantly higher for diploma candidates (68 percent) than for certificate candidates (61 percent). The data also showed that IB Diploma candidates who did very well (scoring 6 or higher) on 3 or more IBDP exams were more likely to attend more selective college and universities (Casparly 2011).

Opponents of the IBDP criticize its elitist history, its limited curriculum and the amount of stress students experience while completing the programme. Critics say it is a mechanism for “class reproduction” (Tarc 2009:3) by giving advantages to “already

privileged members of society” (Tarc 2009:105). They contend that the IBO only touts its “high standards” and has tended to ignore national trends towards standardized assessment (e.g. A Nation at Risk and No Child Left Behind) which drives current education reforms designed to help disadvantaged students, expressing little concern over decreased spending in public schools and increased use of standardized testing which are inconsistent with IBO’s values (Tarc 2009:106). The IBDP must ensure high academic standards for university entry which limits how progressive or innovative it can be regarding the curricular content of its programme (Tarc 2009:110). Concerns have been voiced that the breadth of the curriculum sacrifices the depth of the curriculum, especially in math and the sciences (Taylor and Porath 2006). “Teachers are involved in teaching various subject courses, dealing with an externally-set curriculum or syllabus and specific requirements, with deadlines for internal and external assessment of student work. The courses have considerable amounts of content. All these make for time pressures on teachers” (Tilke 2011). The IBDP is an extremely exacting course of study for high school students who are driven to take the IBDP because of their desire to be accepted into the college of their choice. An IBDP teacher believes that, “The popularity of IB in the States is simply part of the ‘I gotta get into the college I want or my life is over’ ethos that is becoming so prevalent among middle class kids in the [United] States. The colleges preach, ‘we know your SAT’s and your AP’s and GPA’s but we want to see something more’... and for some the [IB] diploma is just that” (Tarc 2009:107). While in the programme students are tired and stressed; and the rewards of the IBDP seem distant and unattainable. “A reality for students is that the [IB]DP is a demanding program, with significant amounts of work requirement and deadlines for

assignments” (Tilke 2011). Students feel enormous pressure to meet the scholastic expectations of parents, peers, and teachers. They lose confidence in their academic abilities and they question the value of earning the IB Diploma (Taylor and Porath, 2006).

In considering whether the IBDP can improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students the perception is mixed. Though the IBO states that it is not a programme merely for gifted students (IBO 2005-2011), on average only 10-15% students in an IB Diploma granting school attempt to earn the full diploma, but 50-70% of students will take one or two IB classes (Lund 2011). Though this represents a small portion of students enrolled in United States schools, the influence of IB extends beyond the number of its users. Mathews and Hill contend that, “The IB Diploma is a programme that can strengthen many US schools”, as it provides outstanding teacher training, which the AP does not. “It has taken hold in the USA in a significant if small way and it will continue to prosper there, despite the negative manner in which its internationalism is associated by some Americans with socialism, disarmament, radical environmentalism and moral relativism” (2010). By offering an established and rigorous curriculum the IBDP can provide more demanding educational opportunities in urban schools. There is a growing awareness that standardized testing (the most popular form of assessment) has led to a narrowing of curriculum and to a limiting of innovative teaching. The IBDP and its assessment regime is opening up opportunities (especially in Title I schools) “for more liberal pedagogical approaches that [have] declined under the previous standardization reforms” (Tarc 2009:120). In 2002, 92% of IB World schools in the United States were state funded which is quite different from many other

parts of the world where most schools offering the IBDP are private (Bunnell 2008). However, scalability is a problem. The process to become an IB Diploma granting school is long, arduous and expensive and can be prohibitive for disadvantaged schools. The application process normally takes a full-time school coordinator (with full cooperation of all stakeholders) 2-3 years to complete. The total of application fees are \$23,000 with an annual renewal fee of \$10,000 (IBO 2005-2011). This is a questionable undertaking when only 10-15% of students at an IB school are enrolled in the programme, but a 2007 study looked at three high schools in the United States to consider the experiences of minority students earning the IB Diploma. The study revealed that it was crucial that minority students believed that they could earn the Diploma and that methods to scaffold learning for these students were necessary to support them throughout the programme (Tilke 2011:10). The IBDP has been introduced in public high schools to address the needs of ethnically diverse student populations. By changing the perception that the IBDP is only for advanced students which admits students based on their performance in standardized tests, to an approach that focuses on each individual student's motivation and performance in class, greater IBDP enrollment of minority students is achieved. Teacher encouragement of smart students who might not be aware of their own abilities to enroll in the IBDP, results in significantly more minority students taking the most rigorous classes available at their school (Kugler and Albright 2005).

Earning an IB Diploma is a positive determinant of acceptance into a student's college of choice. Though, the resultant stress of meeting the requirements of the IBDP leads students, parents and teachers to question whether the challenges and

pressures are worth the results. IB Diploma candidates can be assured that they are well prepared for a postsecondary education. “They may be too busy to reflect, but if and when they do, they may find that they have a sense of fulfillment and achievement, as well as valuable experiences and skills that will serve them well in the 21st century” (Taylor and Porath 2006). Many students report that their involvement with IB prepared them for college and helped them to make the most of their university experience. Students reflect on “their sense of preparedness, their self-confidence, their research skills, their ability to manage their time, and their willingness to be actively engaged in their own learning” (Taylor and Porath 2006). “In the University of California system, [IB]DP performance was the best predictor of college performance, and across income groups IB students earned higher grade point averages and graduated at higher rates” (IBO 2011). Despite this, earning an IB Diploma is not the only means of successfully preparing for postsecondary education and ensuring college acceptance. A study commissioned by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute compared AP courses with corresponding IB courses. Each course was evaluated based on its content, rigor and clarity and by applying these standards, reviewers gave essentially the same grade to corresponding IB and AP courses (IBO 2008).

The IBDP was developed as a programme for foreign students in European countries to have access to an international educational curriculum that would be accepted at any university worldwide. Is it now merely a method for advanced students to get admitted to a higher tier college? The IBDP challenges the perspectives of other types of school reform by providing a standard curriculum. Though the influence of the programme extends into the existing school curriculum as most teachers who instruct IB

courses also instruct courses outside of the Diploma Programme (Lund 2011), the students who are enrolled in the Diploma Programme benefit the most from the IBDP curriculum. Recommendations have been made for the IBO to streamline its curriculum to make it more user-friendly and to consider allowing some of its courses to be taught apart from the Diploma Programme (IBO 2008). Emphasis on student's earning individual IB certificates (much like individual AP courses) could lead to more diverse student involvement in the programme, because consideration of the entire Diploma Programme is daunting. Data gathered from students reveals that earning IB certificates (not the IB Diploma) also leads to high acceptance rates at most U.S. colleges (de Ajemian 2010). Participation in the IB Diploma Programme is not a clear indicator of a student's future success. "Students following the IB Diploma Programme may be viewed as a self-selecting group. In such situations, it is not known what factors could have contributed to their selection of the IB Diploma Programme. Would such students still have succeeded in their studies if they had not opted to follow the IB Diploma Programme?" (IBO 2008). Currently, there is an absence of research that addresses the value of earning an IB Diploma (IBO 2008). As the IBDP gains popularity in the United States the "idea of IB transcends the practical goal of developing international standards or a mobile diploma" (Tarc 2009:7). The perception that the IBDP prepares students (who either earn the full Diploma or complete IB Certificates) to gain admittance and succeed in postsecondary education is accurate, but it should not be considered a panacea of education reform. There are too few IB Diploma granting schools in the United States to assess the larger impact of the programme on the

broader scope of improving educational opportunities for students of all racial, cultural, social and economic backgrounds.

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