

Humanities Research at Hackley

What do Vladimir Nabokov, the Hackley School archives, the filibuster in the United States Senate, U.S. history textbooks, and ancient Greek philosophy have in common? On the face of it, nothing. However, what binds these topics together in the present-day Hackley School context is clear: these were the topics selected by last year's students in Independent Research in English and History.



The Independent Research in English and History (IREH) course launched during the 2019-2020 school year, emanating from the fruitful conversations and thoughtful programming characteristic of *Redefining Excellence: Learning Beyond Boundaries*, Hackley's strategic plan.

One pillar within *Redefining Excellence* is the aspiration that Hackley will “redefine a liberal arts education.” A more specific thread of this broader focus is that Hackley would “develop research centers within and across disciplinary boundaries.” Hackley has had a heralded Independent Research Program in Science for nearly a decade. But research is also at the heart of humanities scholarship. In fact, research methods and essays have long been embedded within history and English curricula. The impetus of the strategic plan bolstered the History and English departments to create a separate offering focused on research and writing in the humanities to mirror what has been offered by the Science department. Thus, Independent Research in English and History was born.

For its first two years, the IREH course was team-taught by Bill Davies, chair of the History department and Upper School history teacher, and James Flanigan, Upper School English teacher. When Bill

retired in 2021, I joined James as a co-teacher of IREH. The group that brought you that wonderful medley of topics introduced above were our students last year. Last year's IREH cohort delivered distinguished individual work and made a significant contribution to broader efforts to promote and expand student research at Hackley.

Together with the students from the Independent Science Research Program, they presented at Hackley's First Annual Research Symposium, an evening where our researchers shared their methods and findings with an appreciative audience of students, teachers, administrators, and family members.

The chance to present to a diverse audience is a critical skill for our young scholars. Molly Reinmann '22, a student in last year's section of IREH, reflected on her experience at the symposium: “It was amazing to discuss my work with interested members of the Hackley community, and I had an awesome time putting together an interactive presentation. The energy throughout the building during the Research Symposium was electric and just so quintessentially Hackley—all of us genuinely excited by our research, the opportunity to share it with friends and family, and the chance to learn from our peers.” This year's



Last year's IREH students gather under Kroeger Arch (left); Thomas DeGirolami '22 presents (right) during the First Annual Research Symposium.



research scholars will present their work at the Second Annual Research Symposium taking place in May 2023.

During the course selection process for the 2022-23 school year, there was a significant increase in interest in IREH. After James and I consulted with each other and our respective department chairs, Richard Robinson and Chris Loomis, we decided to split IREH by discipline, giving rise to Independent Research in English and Independent Research in History. This segmentation has allowed us to offer greater specialization of these research courses and to provide more tailored, discipline-specific instruction to our young literary and historical scholars.

This year's research questions reflect our students' expansive curiosity and impressive scholarship. In Independent Research in English, students are exploring questions about the work of Junot Diaz, Gustave Flaubert, Henry David Thoreau, and Carmen Maria Machado. Students in Independent Research in History are examining research questions focused on a wide

range of topics, including the oil crisis of the 1970s, the FBI's COINTELPRO program, free speech standards and the First Amendment, the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and the role of American music and dance as soft power during the Cold War, to name a few.

Additionally, some of the history students are focused on oral history and are tapping into personal family histories to do broader historical research. One student will explore the stories of Jews living in a small town in Greece, while another will examine the role of a prominent newspaper in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo years. Our English and history researchers are still in the early stages of their research and writing, but their progress thus far is impressive.

So, why are these humanities research courses important additions to the Upper School curriculum? They afford a unique and powerful opportunity for Hackley Upper School students. By design, the classes are teacher-facilitated and yet overwhelmingly student-led. One of our researchers this year described the course as providing students with "structured independence."

By the students' own admission, the classes also serve as engaging cohorts, spaces where students share common academic interests. A student in Independent Research in English recently shared, "The discourse in this room makes me smarter. I saw another student reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, so I started reading *God Help the Children*. I am not a reader, but this class makes me want to be a better reader."

As teachers, James and I instruct our students in research methods, assist them in source identification and analysis, challenge them to consider a range of perspectives on their research questions, and coach them as writers. In short, we focus largely on the skills necessary to perform sound research. The content of the classes, meaning what literary or historical topics will be the focal point of their research, is chosen by the students. This represents a notable departure from most other Hackley classes, where teachers and department chairs determine both the content taught and the skills honed. The opportunity for self-directed study within a supportive classroom presents a powerful learning opportunity for students, especially those nearing the finish line of high school.

These courses are timely additions to the Upper School curriculum for another notable reason: their civic value. In fact, another element of *Redefining Excellence* focuses on civic engagement and the School's ambition to "teach and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility independent of political views."

Our students are coming of age at a time when there is considerable, albeit questionable, debate about what

constitutes a fact. "Fake news" is a part of their vernacular. Googling has become a reflex for our students and yet how often do they interrogate the sources that are optimized to reach the top of the feed? Our social media accounts overwhelm them with information and, in some instances, steer them into echo chambers. Clickbait draws many more readers than critical analyses. This is the context for our students. They have never had access to more information, and yet the volume and quality of information have the potential to overwhelm or, worse, mislead them. These humanities research classes aspire to help our students become more effective and analytical readers, filters, and critics of a range of sources. In building these skills for our students, we hope to serve the broader public purpose of building their civic capacity.

Catherine Lapey '22, a student in last year's IREH section, offers a powerful perspective on the course's place and value to students in the Upper School: "If a student wants to explore a passion, they not only have that opportunity through Hackley's various independent research opportunities, but they have a genuine audience within Hackley's community, which often proves equally important."

About the Author:

Andy King has been a member of the Hackley faculty since 1998. Since 2008, he has served as Hackley's Director of the Upper School. Prior to taking on this administrative role, Andy was an Upper School history teacher, advisor, dean, and coach. He is also the proud parent of Henry, a member of Hackley's Class of 2030.