

International Baccalaureate Program holding steady



By Linda Hall / Staff Writer

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WOOSTER — An academy operated by Tri-County Educational Service Center housed at Wooster High School is one of a select few in the state offering a global education with a reputation for setting the highest bar academically.

Worldwide, between 4,000-5,000 schools offer the International Baccalaureate Programme. In Ohio,

Tri-County International Academy is one of just 21 schools offering an IB degree.

The new head of Tri-County Academy, Victoria Birk, said based on the program's pedigree, she had hoped for "a little bit more growth" in attendance in the local student population. "It's still not on everybody's radar."

She also understands funding issues in terms of students leaving their home schools in favor of the academy. On the other hand, she said, the "trade-off" is that the high schools of origin are able to say they offer the IB program and that looks good for their own credentials.

"It's a feather in their cap," she pointed out, also noting IB students are able to participate in home school activities and graduate with their own high school.

While there hasn't been an increase in the overall ebb and flow of students at Tri-County International Academy, neither has there been a shortage.

With a capacity of 25-28 students per class, this year's population in the IB program encompasses 20 seniors and 24 juniors from eight school districts in Wayne, Holmes and Ashland counties, Birk said.

The bulk of the student population, 31, is from Wooster High, but in attendance are five students from Triway, two each from Ashland and Northwestern, and one student apiece from Hiland, Mapleton, Smithville and West Holmes.

A student from Hiland High School is “the first ever” in Wooster’s IB academy, said Birk, acknowledging, “That’s quite a hike (to travel),” although fortunately the IB day begins not at 7:30 a.m., as does the schedule at many high schools, but at 8:05 a.m.

“It does make a difference,” she said, adding student safety is of course a concern.

Birk is no stranger to IB, having taught history and Theory of Knowledge at Tri-County Academy for the past six years.

She took over the reigns from former head of school Andy Kiel and is encouraging potential students and their families to check out the program in an open house scheduled for Jan. 9, 7-8:30 p.m., in Wooster High School’s Performing Arts Center.

Students now attending Tri-County International Academy analyzed just what it takes not only to succeed, but also to enjoy the famously rigorous academic program.

“It’s definitely a challenge and takes some getting used to,” said Zach Miller, a junior from Triway High School, but “we’re getting the hang of it.”

Miller cited the benefit of tackling the rigor with the support of IB teachers “while at home with family” rather than confronting it in college.

He described it as “an extreme workload with extreme support. I anticipate walking into college and feeling comfortable”

“It is intimidating,” Miller said, “but your needs will be met.”

It is “pretty rewarding,” said Katherine Koontz, a senior from Northwestern High School, noting, despite the increased workload, “Homework never really builds up.”

She did recall staying up until 4 a.m. on one occasion when “soccer, band and IB overlapped,” but overall, it is “difficult, but doable,” she said.

It’s not a fit for everyone, said Birk, describing an IB student as curious, up for a challenge, willing to work hard and also a “risk-taker.”

Her opinion breaks the myth of IB being a ticket only to elite schools. While it markedly boosts the chances of getting into an Ivy League school, its graduates don’t always choose one of them, she said, giving as an example an IB graduate she knows who attended Bowling Green University with the goal of becoming a math professor.

Colleges do recognize a student who conquers IB as one who took on the “total package,” not just an area in which she or he has the greatest academic strength.

“They give you a little bit of a bump for that,” Birk said, although continuing to acknowledge high school students “have a lot of options” in terms of high school paths to take.

One of the advantages, beyond what the IB program may do for college admissions opportunities, is the ability to learn with “like-minded students who are serious about school,” Birk said.

It was one of the reasons Kaitlynn Lake, a Wooster senior, joined the program.

Beyond that, Lake likes “the deeper connection” in her studies and the way in which courses “build off one another to build new concepts,” like the roots of a tree coming together, she said.

“I like that it’s global,” said Emma Oberlin, a Smithville High School junior, pleased that her friend in Costa Rica, also an IB student, is studying the same curriculum.

Although it “comes with some drawbacks,” Oberlin said. “It opens up a lot of doors.”

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