

A Commitment to Excellence: Pursuing Transformative Faculty Professional Development

BY JENNIFER TURNER, EDITOR & INSTITUTIONAL WRITER

For nearly fifteen years, Ashley Hall has invested in its faculty members by advocating for transformative professional development experiences. Through reflective inquiry, deep investigation, and personal growth, faculty members gain enrichment for both themselves and their students.

At Ashley Hall, faculty professional development always begins with its most essential component: self-reflection. “It is designed to be something deeply personal that helps the faculty member to become a better teacher,” noted Academic Program Coordinator Carolyn Newton. Originating in 2005, the current professional development process was conceived in part as a rejection of formulaic continuing education requirements. “In my past experience, professional development consisted of a very narrow set of things,” remarked Upper School faculty member Nick Bozanic, who last year retired as Assistant to the Head of School for Academic Affairs. “It was given to you with no personal involvement. When I was hired in 2005, I was mandated by Head of School Jill Muti to form a faculty committee to devise a professional development plan that would foster lifelong learning.”

Meeting for over a year, the committee decided to make faculty members accountable for their own professional growth. “Professional development at Ashley Hall is from the faculty up, rather than from the administration down,” emphasized Bozanic. “We are giving permission to faculty members to explore and think about what it is they want to accomplish. From the beginning, I felt strongly that in order to foster personal and professional growth, you have to be open-minded.” With that freedom of vision, however, comes responsibility. A member of the original committee, Upper School faculty member Roscoe Davis still recognizes the importance of that duality. “We crafted entirely new guidelines for professional development that left it up to the individual to determine how he or she might grow,” he declared. “Everyone was to have a goal that would make him or her a more active and engaged individual, a person always learning.”

A core component of Ashley Hall’s professional development process has been the Banding Project, a rigorous exploration that each faculty member undertakes beginning in his or her fourth year. “Every Banding Project starts with a deep reflective piece about how you came to be a teacher and continue to work on your craft,” explained Newton. “You also devise a deep focus, something that you want to work on in the classroom and are committed to exploring.” Each faculty member establishes a committee of two

colleagues to observe classes, provide insight, and write assessment pieces. While over the years some of Ashley Hall’s signature programs have developed from ideas explored during Banding Projects (the Reggio Emilia teaching method, Senior Thesis, Oral Proficiency Interview, and Oral Defense Project), the enrichment of faculty members remains the foundation of the process.

In 2018, a faculty committee revisited professional development and streamlined milestones. “They ultimately arrived at a system that acknowledges the beauty of the Banding Project while allowing for more perspective and investment,” stated Newton. In addition to continuing to pursue yearly professional development, faculty members will complete every five years a Foundation Review to chart their teaching journeys and map where they want to go next. Moreover, the Banding Project will be phased out in favor of more opportunities for immersive enrichment and reflection.

While all faculty members hired by fall 2019 will eventually complete a Banding Project, they also will have the option to pursue two voluntary special investigations: an Amethyst Project after ten years at Ashley Hall and a Pearl Project after twenty years. “The idea is that these big, deep dives need to start at ten years, when the faculty member has become invested in Ashley Hall and has a richer field of experience from which to work,” revealed Newton. “You must have a passion about some idea and the commitment to undertake a substantial investigation and reflection that will ultimately benefit students,” Davis emphasized.

By investing in its faculty members, Ashley Hall empowers them to think deeply about what it means to be a teacher and then provides them with the encouragement and resources to grow into that vision. “The esprit de corps on campus arises in large measure from our collective participation in professional development,” acknowledged Bozanic. “The faculty member now has a vested personal interest in what happens on campus. There is a tremendous sense of common cause, and individual plans become integrated into the life of the School. It feels good as a faculty member to know you are being heard.”



A selection of Banding Projects completed over the last year, the following profiles highlight the diversity, creativity, and ingenuity of faculty professional development at Ashley Hall.

Chris Frisby

Upper School | History



As a historian, Chris Frisby is inspired by the personal narrative's power to encourage self-reflection and spark meaningful impact. "I have spent my Banding year working to assess and implement civics education and civic engagement in my classroom by using self-reflection as a tool," he remarked. "Placing students at the center of their own story reminds them of the centrality of their places in history. They respond well and learn effectively when the theoretical or hypothetical is made personal."

Teaching United States history and American government and politics, Frisby draws on a wealth of themes and subjects to encourage students' interests in civic engagement, public service, historic preservation, and social justice. Utilizing journaling, the Harkness method, and creative collaboration, he upholds personal reflection as the gateway to a deeper historical analysis. "I have helped students come to terms with their definitions of the American Dream and to begin to trace their families' relationship to that dream," he said. "I have asked students to place themselves in the past, present, and future by reinterpreting events from the American Revolution, crafting their own inaugural address as the first female President, and writing their own State of the Union speeches. I want students to see how their historical studies, at root, are really an exercise in tracing the events that have led up to, and resulted in, their very lives."

As a result of his research, Frisby hopes to pursue two projects to enrich students: a future summer travel experience exploring Civil War capitals, battlefields, and

monuments to investigate historical landscapes, preservation, and memory; and a new elective course revolving around the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both proposals are underpinned by Frisby's deep belief in history's power. "It can be said that understanding history is a fundamental human pursuit that reflects our need to tell stories about ourselves," he noted. "A good understanding of history can cut through the abundant landscape of false narratives, platitudes, and strata of myth built up over time and put one in a place to reckon more forthrightly with the past."

Claire Christensen, Ph.D.

Upper School | Physics & Mathematics

With a passion for physics, Claire Christensen, Ph.D., gravitated toward a Banding Project that would allow her to share her love for the field and perhaps inspire the next generation of physicists. “In addition to designing and implementing the curriculum for an advanced high school physics course, I was interested in comparing different methodologies commonly used to teach physics at the high school and undergraduate levels,” Christensen said. “My hope was to bring to Ashley Hall a unique, rigorous, and engaging college-level course that would give students the mathematical tools and techniques and the precise conceptual understanding of physical concepts that I—as a physicist—know to be necessary for success in physics and engineering courses at the college level and beyond.”

Now in its second year, Honors Physics II continues to change and grow under Christensen’s adept hand. “I have a complete curriculum with associated problem sets, notes, activities, labs, assessments, and more covering a variety of topics from basic kinematics to introductory quantum mechanics and special relativity,” she revealed. “Last year, the course was taught from an algebra-based perspective, but this year, I introduced a ‘Calculus bootcamp’ that has enabled us to use a Calculus-based approach for many topics.” One of Christensen’s goals was to support students’ foundational acquisition of basic physical science concepts in preparation for the Honors Physics II curriculum. “I have enjoyed working with my colleagues to expand and change our program to make sure that we have the most rigorous physical sciences curriculum to best serve students interested in pursuing degrees in physics, chemistry, or engineering,” she noted. “I think, ultimately, our program will be much stronger as a result.”

For Christensen, teaching Honors Physics II has become a meaningful undertaking for both her and her students. “Physics is unique among subjects in terms of its ability to thoroughly and precisely—through the language of mathematics—provide us with a glimpse of the inner workings of our universe,” she said. “It has been an enriching experience for me to learn to see the world around us through my students’ eyes—to try to understand how each student thinks and learns and to try to help her discover for herself a bit of what I find so beautiful about physics.”



Allison Bischoff

Lower School | Kindergarten



vegetables, herbs, berries, and special plants to attract bees, butterflies, and one other enchanted thing with wings: fairies. “The girls love our fairy garden, and I enjoy seeing their creativity,” emphasized Bischoff. “We collect natural materials found on campus and decorate terracotta pots to make into fairy houses.” It is one more thoughtful element that makes the garden such a magical place, one where her kindergartners thrive. “They love watching the slow progression of the plant growth, especially when they bear fruit,” she enthused. “When we start plants from seeds, they exclaim with joy once the little green shoots come up from the soil. The most rewarding part of this project is their excitement.”

Loving to watch her kindergarten students grow, Allison Bischoff found the perfect place to nurture their learning: their very own garden. “I have always loved to garden, and my family has fun with it at home,” she smiled. “Bringing this hobby to my students was a way to extend this passion and cultivate their interest. It never gets dull watching the growth of tiny seeds into blooming plants.” Gaining permission to revive the four medicinal garden beds near Ashley Hall’s Health Center, Bischoff intentionally involved her students in all aspects of the undertaking, including preparing the beds, choosing the seeds to plant, and decorating the area. Most importantly, she wanted to connect classroom lessons to outdoor investigations.

“School gardens have been shown to enhance academic achievement, a healthy lifestyle, environmental stewardship, and community and social development,” she said. “I really wanted to create an outdoor classroom. The garden integrates multiple disciplines, including reading, writing, math, science, and nutrition in a hands-on, fun way. Children learn the meaning of hard work and patience, while enriching their capacities for observation and thinking.” To enhance students’ experiences, Bischoff makes connections to the Charleston community, including field trips to local gardens and visits by farmer Casey Price of Jeremiah Farm and Goat Dairy, who serves as gardener-in-residence and leads special sessions with students.

Over the course of the last year, kindergartners have filled their garden with

Katie Harvard

Early Education Center | Pre-Kindergarten

For Katie Harvard, playing is serious business. Throughout her fifteen years of working at Ashley Hall, she has seen first-hand how play serves as one of the most important factors in a child's education. "I wanted to focus on the brain development behind why play is so important in our lives and the lives of children," Harvard explained. "Children learn how to interact with peers when engaged in play activities while also building on important schemas about the real world. Children of all ages spend many hours participating in play activities because play supports their understanding of their social environment, facilitates their efforts to build a realistic sense of self, and strengthens their understanding of various roles and social interactions. Perhaps most importantly, play is an enjoyable experience for all children."

To investigate the idea of play for her banding project, Harvard analyzed the Reggio Emilia philosophy that emphasizes visual documentation and influences the daily activities of her classroom. She decided to curate a scrapbook to convey her current research, feature the project-based learning in her classroom, and reflect on her teaching experience in both pre-kindergarten and third grade. "When I was brainstorming how I would portray my growth and reflection pieces, a puzzle came to mind," she said. "Then as I was walking across campus, I happened upon a sole wooden Jenga piece, waiting to be put back with the other pieces of the stacking puzzle to make it complete. Then it dawned on me: Jenga could model an all-encompassing structure of play that requires both physical and mental skills."

Embracing her puzzle model, Harvard appreciates how the banding process highlighted her continual growth as an educator. "This project has helped me to become a better teacher, mother, and parent," she acknowledged. "I put my attention on the whole child and what I need to do to instruct in a way that allows my students to think for themselves, be playful, and first and foremost, find joy in what and how they are learning."



Anna Brock

Performing Arts



course through RCM and passed with Honors. I had already achieved RCM Elementary certification because I had entered the required number of students in Elementary exams. I now have two of the three levels of certification.”

A crowning achievement for Brock was spearheading the RCM examination weekend at Ashley Hall in May 2019, which was the first time RCM Certificate Program assessments were offered in Charleston. Of the nineteen students who took the offered exams in piano and voice, thirteen were Ashley Hall students. This impressive achievement is a fitting testament to Brock’s commitment to professional growth, both for herself and her students.

By pursuing National Piano Teacher Certification through the National Association of Music Teachers, Anna Brock chose a Banding Project directly tied to her lifelong quest to become a better artist and teacher. As part of the certification requirements, she articulated her teaching philosophy and meticulously documented her work with students. “I completed a number of projects, including presenting my teaching by submitting videos of my playing and of three lessons as well as adjudication sheets from student piano events,” Brock explained. “I also analyzed four teaching pieces and shared information about the tools I use in my teaching environment, including two pianos, a computer, a video camera, and percussion instruments.”

In addition to obtaining national certification, Brock created an expansive portfolio to capture the growth she has experienced during her years at Ashley Hall. The collection presents a rich accounting of her commitment to professional excellence. In particular, Brock’s portfolio traces her integral role in cultivating Ashley Hall’s involvement with The Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM), one of the most prestigious music education institutions in North America. In 2014, Brock and fellow piano teacher Dr. Elsa Dixon took online pedagogy lessons in order to introduce the RCM curriculum and exams to Ashley Hall. “We learned how to prepare students for RCM exams, which were offered for the first time in South Carolina in May 2015,” said Brock. “Starting in 2016, I took the online Intermediate Piano Teacher certification

David Czernecki

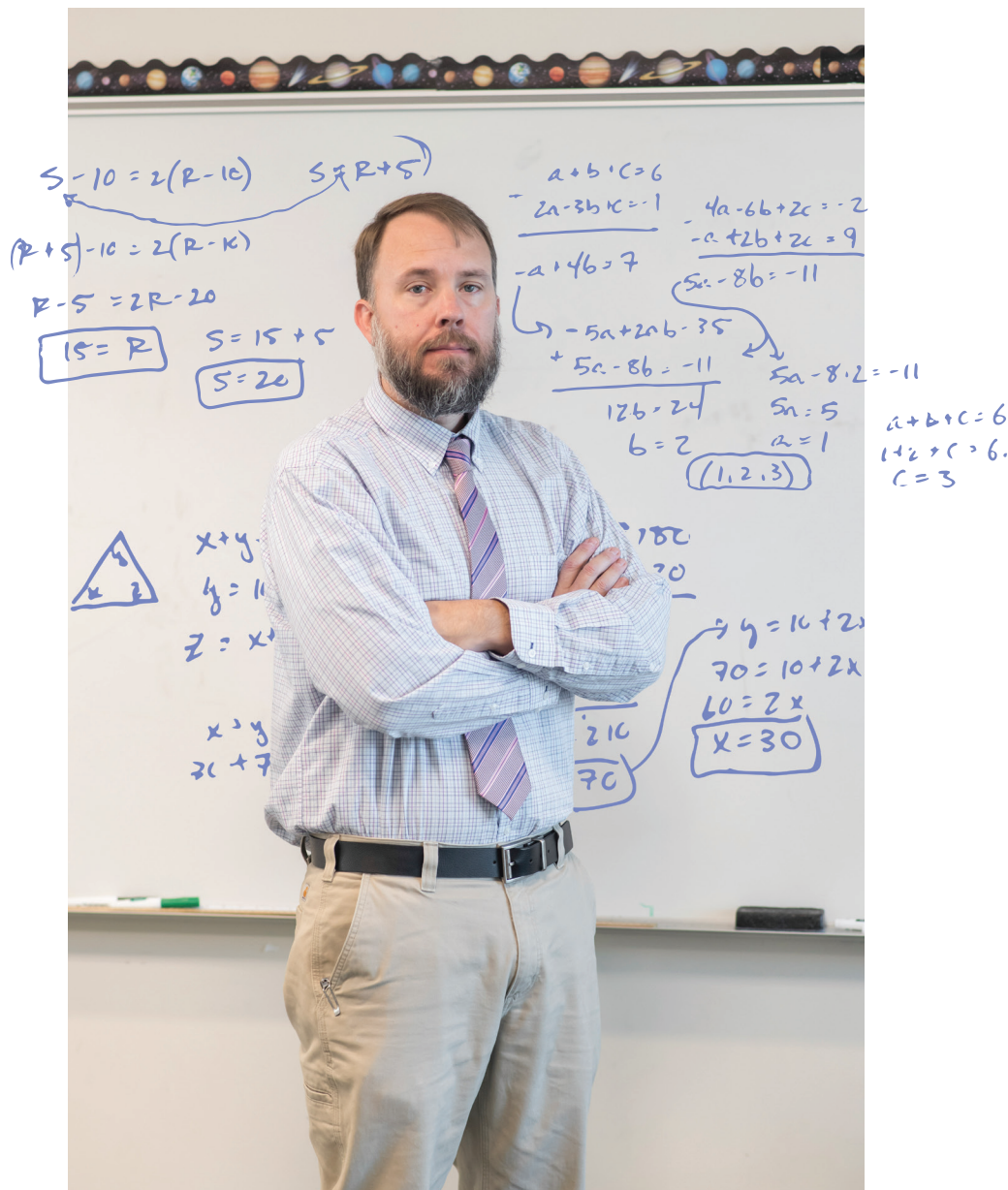
Upper School | Mathematics

David Czernecki's choice of Banding Project reveals an interest that lies close to his heart: helping his students to succeed and feel positive about the process. "The focus of my project is the use of cumulative assessment as a learning tool," Czernecki stated. "I initially used traditional assessments for my AP Calculus students, and the first few years of AP scores were not terrible but also not great. I did not feel that my students' AP scores were an accurate reflection of their knowledge, so I began to consider what we did and how we could potentially make the situation better." Czernecki's detailed analysis revealed a potential solution. "I kept thinking about the style of assessment used for the AP exam, which is cumulative, randomized, and constructed with certain problems requiring students to make connections between concepts," Czernecki revealed. "I felt that if we could model this style, but within our eighty-minute class periods, our students would be more successful on the AP exam."

The results speak for themselves: Each year since 2015-2016, when cumulative assessment in AP Calculus was introduced at Ashley Hall, students' scores have been significantly higher than the global average. Based on these outcomes, cumulative assessment has been adopted in a majority of courses in Ashley Hall's Math, Science, and Technology Department. "The cumulative assessment was developed as a way of helping our students to prepare better, connect concepts within problem solving, and retain material from one assessment to the next, hopefully culminating in a successful AP Calculus exam score," Czernecki reasoned.

"I believe the data shows a positive correlation between the use of cumulative assessment and student learning."

As Czernecki readily admits, his investigation began long before he settled on a focus for his Banding Project. Foremost, the motivation for conducting his research has always been to see his students excel. "Eighty-four percent of students who replied to a survey believe cumulative assessment had a positive impact on their learning experience," iterated Czernecki. "Every time I consider something new, I ask myself, 'Will this make me a better teacher or is this better for the students?' This has led to the development of my teaching philosophy: To provide students an opportunity to learn."



Desiree Landry Bonetto

Upper School | Classics



When Desiree Landry Bonetto set out to hike a portion of the Appalachian Trail in July for her Banding Project, her inspiration ran deeper than merely her love of nature and adventure. “I wanted to undertake a journey in two parts: a physical journey on the Appalachian Trail and a mental journey through further research on the mythology of the wild,” she said. A lover of structure and plans, she also wanted to venture beyond her comfort zone in a way that could be applied to her teaching. “I kept returning to words like flexibility, adaptability, and improvisation,” Bonetto noted. “I found myself frustrated when plans changed or students responded differently than expected. I wanted to build the confidence and adaptability to bend with the wind and respond, rather than react, to whatever challenges came my way.”

After months of careful planning to hike for two weeks, Bonetto began her solitary trek in northern Georgia. “I was carrying everything I needed to sleep, eat, filter water, and walk for days on end,” she explained. However, circumstances, including a rainstorm, conspired against Bonetto. Hiking twenty-eight miles in three days in wet socks and boots, she developed horrible blisters and the beginning of trench foot. “My reality did not live up to the fantasy; yet, in a small way, I found what I was looking for,” she said. “I went out in search of a challenge that could help me to relax into my teaching style, to meet the girls where they are, and to remember how difficult it is to try something completely new. To take a journey into the wild is a test of resilience and one’s ability to meet the uncontrollable.”

Having to think on her feet as her plans unraveled, Bonetto now applies her new knowledge to her classroom. “Being on the trail reminded me of the frustration and discomfort of learning something new,” she affirmed. “I am finding more empathy with our students, who are constantly in a state of learning something new and working through those challenges. It is helpful to remember how difficult it is to take risks, make mistakes, and persevere, and it is equally important to remember the joy of overcoming each obstacle along the way.”



Each year, Ashley Hall faculty members pursue professional development experiences that promote their growth as teachers and enhance their students' learning. Reflecting faculty members' passions and goals, these projects allow in-depth opportunities to refine teaching methods and learn new skills.



IN HIS OWN WORDS: THE TEACHER BECOMES THE STUDENT

PURSUING THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Devoted to the craft of teaching, Upper School faculty member Andrea Muti chose for his annual professional development to seek out and examine global best practices in education. Pursuing

the International Baccalaureate (IB) Certificate in Teaching and Learning through Bethel University, Muti once again became a student, a role that helped him to think critically about what practices work best to engage a learner. The twenty-week program required reflection, discussion, and collaboration around three main courses on curriculum processes, assessment and learning, and teaching and learning. A final capstone project completed the extensive endeavor. Finding the IB's emphasis on student-directed learning complements Ashley Hall's inquiry-based curriculum, Muti has already taken steps to apply what he learned to his Upper School classes.

“In a world that is continuously changing, the idea behind the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) is that faculty members teach students to take responsibility, to be internationally-minded, and to take action. The ultimate goal of the IB program is not only to help students develop academic skills and efficient study methods, but also to allow them to see connections between the local and the global community, and to get involved in service by actively applying what they are learning in class.

Using the constructivist approach, the IB program focuses on extending the zone of proximal development, where teachers and students come together to build knowledge through scaffolding, resulting in enhanced learning that would not have been possible without this collaboration. By allowing students to proceed at their own pace and to follow their interests, the IB program enables them to become critical thinkers and inquirers. As faculty members, we should never forget that while we are in control of what we teach, we are unable to control what each student learns. When adequately applied, this problem-solving approach empowers students to think

deeply about a specific issue and to create a solution that is functional for the twenty-first century.

An IB aspect I am currently focusing on is the strategy of pre-assessment, which helps teachers create a bridge, a connection between what they are teaching and what students already know about a specific argument. The pre-assessment is a powerful instrument because it helps teachers understand what is going to spark students' interests, or what roadblocks they must overcome, and use this acquired knowledge to shape their lessons. My students not only will have the ability to think critically about what they are studying but also will be able to formulate solutions to fix specific problems.

Moreover, the IB program offers a specific perspective to strategize my lessons and measure what I am teaching. Through a combination of different assessments (individual and group projects, individual research, oral presentations, and written assignments), students are evaluated in ways that they can express their knowledge and skills best. This increases the validity of the assessment itself because I can be certain that the final grade is a reflection of what they know and what they can do. It takes patience and time to plan and to create a course around these parameters, but once I have the system, I am in control of what I am doing and know the direction instead of improvising. It is a very methodical and specific approach.

The most rewarding part of becoming certified as an IB Educator is being validated that it is not the amount of content that I am teaching that makes the difference but rather the quality with which I do it. The IB program reminds instructors that they should not rush through lessons just looking at the surface, but rather strive to go more in-depth and give a voice to different perspectives. This semester, I have adopted the IB assessment methodology for the chapter on the United Nations in my Human Rights and International Law class, and I am already planning to transform and translate more of the things that I do in my classes into an IB approach. Everything that I teach must have a reason, a purpose, a relevance, and a connection with something that I want to accomplish with my students.”

