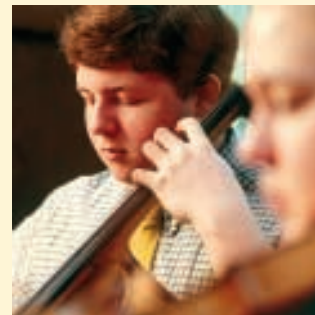


The Taft .  
**Portrait of a**  
*By Debora Phipps*  
**Graduate**



Children often ask why they have to do things—make their beds, eat their broccoli, write thank-you notes—and sometimes, depending on the frustration level of the parent, they receive the quick reply, “because I said so.” If this occurs, they might eat the vegetable or pull up the sheets, but they won’t understand the reasons for doing so—making it less likely that they’ll learn much from the exercise or perform the action voluntarily in the future.

In the same way, students ask, “Why do we have to do this?” Experienced teachers know the predictive signs: the escalating grumbling as an assignment sheet or quiz circulates the room, the shuffling of feet as students reposition themselves, lingering glances at the clock, and ultimately, the heavy sigh which prompts a classmate to ask the critical question. The query, though, is a good one. Without a sense of its purpose, students may complete an assignment without learning much from doing so. And without a shared sense of what she will learn, the design of the assignment, the student may find herself completing it only to earn a grade. Just as importantly, she might be unable to see how her learning is connected to the learning she experiences elsewhere on campus.

The following italicized examples—all taken from students’ real experiences—describe various instances in which students exhibit behavior described by the “Taft Portrait of a Graduate,” a document the faculty have created to identify the school’s educational aims. They illustrate the ways in which our daily behavior and attitudes reveal what we really learn and act on, rather than what we’re merely compelled to do.

◀ Michael Karin '81

## Portrait of a Graduate:

A Taft education prepares its students in a community devoted to creating lifelong learners, thoughtful citizens, and caring people. More particularly, Taft graduates have exhibited that they

- act with honor and integrity, and value both the Taft Honor Code and the School’s fundamental conviction that honesty and personal responsibility are the cornerstones of character and of community.
- serve others unselfishly, reflecting and acting upon the School’s motto in both formal and informal contexts: *Non ut sibi ministretur sed ut ministret.*
- have cultivated a moral thoughtfulness through exposure to various ethical perspectives and ways of thinking. They have shown that they make informed choices after considering the possible consequences of their actions and decisions.
- respect and appreciate diverse peoples and cultures, and they recognize the opportunities inherent in a diverse community.
- make informed choices in living healthy and balanced lives.
- apply the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind of all disciplines to framing questions and solving problems in the pursuit of understanding. Moreover, they see even the most formidable challenges as opportunities for growth.
- possess intellectual curiosity and resourcefulness, and actively engage in the process of learning.
- work cooperatively and collaboratively; they are willing to subdue their individual needs and desires in order to contribute to the collective efforts of people united in a common purpose.
- work and think independently. They are self-reliant, disciplined, and courageous about taking risks in their thinking.
- express themselves clearly, purposefully, and creatively in their speaking and writing, as well as other forms that they find effective and rewarding.
- appreciate the arts and have explored their own capacity for creation in all of their endeavors. They apply imagination and inventiveness in the creative process.
- apply appropriate technologies to the process of learning and understand the possibilities and limitations of various technological innovations.
- reflect regularly upon their learning and themselves as learners, leading to greater awareness of themselves as individuals and of their places in the world in which they live.



◀ Graduation 1988



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*An upper mid, packing up her books after a class discussion on Emerson's "Self-Reliance," asks her teacher whether the essay seems to predict America's self-absorption today.*

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In the spring of 2001, new Headmaster Willy MacMullen announced the formation of the Faculty Forum committee, charged with considering the academic life of the school. The purpose of this committee, made up of ten faculty members totaling over a century of experience, was to examine what and how we teach—specifically, to explore what we wanted a Taft graduate to know and be able to do. Two years later, after countless meetings whose records take up 4 1/2 inches worth of paper in my file drawer, we now have a "Taft Portrait of a Graduate," a document that begins with this preamble: "A Taft education prepares its students in a community devoted to creating lifelong learners, thoughtful citizens, and caring people. More particularly, Taft graduates have exhibited that they..." followed by a list of those skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that define Taft students.

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*A lower mid, struggling with a geometry proof in the Learning Center, relaxes when an upper-school student offers his help. On the third problem, the younger student suggests, "Wait. Let me try it on my own."*

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When Willy first alluded to this Portrait in his Fathers' Day talk last November, he expressed feeling both excited and daunted. To promise parents that their children would exhibit these characteristics requires enormous faith in the faculty as well as the students. That trust derives from the process through which the School designed the Portrait. Initially, each academic department met to identify those discipline-specific skills that each student should demonstrate by his or her senior year. The history department struggled to define the role of research, a concern shared by the Library staff. Foreign language teachers considered the importance of teaching an appreciation for native cultures in the classroom—and so on.

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*Students enter the classroom with multiple copies of their essays, ready for peer critique. They understand that constructive criticism is a form of respect, and settle down to work collectively to improve each paper.*

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These departmental statements were then shared with the Forum committee, which sifted through the material, identifying those skills and attitudes valued by more than one department. From eight, to four, to two, and finally, to one page, we honed the Portrait to include those overlapping and crucial descriptors that reflect what we value and, ultimately, what we want to be sure that all students learn. Though charged

with consideration of the academic program, many departments included qualities more traditionally associated with character education—evidence of a quality of the school often noted by alumni. At Taft, students learn as much about themselves as they do about math or science, and much of this character education occurs in the classroom. Whether it be ethical analysis of Hamlet's decisions, consideration of the ways in which intolerance leads to conflict throughout history, or simply lower school teachers' reminding students of the importance of getting enough sleep before a test, class discussion extends to issues much larger than a particular text or academic idea. Qualities such as honesty and integrity, an appreciation of community and diversity, understanding of the importance of healthy balance—these are as much a part of the academic curriculum as of the teaching that occurs in dorms, adviser meetings, athletics, arts, activities, and Morning Meetings.

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*The teacher distributes a mixture of iron, sand, and salt; lower-mid science students, working in pairs, must find a way to determine the amount of each component in their sample. An art teacher assigns students to construct a clay structure: the only stipulation is that each piece must be 25 inches tall.*

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All faculty members then discussed the Forum's edited list, which went back to

academic departments as well as those groups responsible for teaching students in areas beyond the classroom: the admissions group, dormitory heads, the alumni office, the school counselors, the athletic directors. At each meeting, questions arose, spirited discussion ensued, and the Portrait evolved. The more we talked, the more we discovered ways that the Portrait will help guide the design of athletic practices, rehearsals, conversations in the hallways, residential life, and discussions at sit-down dinner. Dormitory heads spoke of redesigning their student evaluation forms to reflect the relevant qualities list in the Portrait. A play director chooses to allow students to select—and then swap—roles during initial rehearsals, including actors in the decisions guiding the production. A soccer coach includes in his “curriculum” a definition of sportsmanship derived from statements in the Portrait, those requiring respect for others, honesty and integrity, and unselfishness.

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*Fifteen students gather in the seminar room to discuss their progress in their research for senior seminar projects. One offers guidance in narrowing an Internet search. Another, researching forensic science, reports that she’s secured an interview with Dr. Henry Lee. The class brainstorms about questions she might ask.*

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“Have exhibited” is a strong phrase to use in the preamble, one that prompted a number of discussions, and some doubt, among the faculty members who worked with this document. Questions arose: What if a student doesn’t demonstrate these qualities? Why not suggest that these qualities were ones we hoped to teach, rather than insisting that all students provide evidence of their acting according to this outline? Why was this important to our school if we felt that most students already, in fact, fulfilled this definition?

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*A math teacher distributes a test and leaves to refill her water bottle while students complete the assignment.*

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It’s this insistence on “exhibited,” the necessity of students demonstrating their learning, that gives the Portrait its power. Many schools have a mission statement, a description of those tenets that they hope that teachers will instill in students. Our current Portrait inverts this more traditional statement: It instead defines what students will learn, rather than what we hope to teach. It requires that teachers provide opportunities for students to learn and, most importantly, to demonstrate their learning. Every teacher knows the feeling of believing that we’ve taught a skill—applications of the side-angle-

side theorem, or the importance of respecting classmates in discussion—only to encounter evidence (a set of bad quizzes, students’ continual interrupting) that demonstrates that they haven’t learned what we think we’ve taught. In these cases, the teacher must reconsider ways to help students learn the skill and to demonstrate their learning. The Portrait employs the same logic on a larger scale by asking students to provide evidence of their acting upon those characteristics listed in the Portrait.

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*A middler begins “That’s an interesting comment” and offers a summary of the previous speaker’s idea before disagreeing with a classmate’s comment about Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence.*

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It’s in the classroom that the Portrait may exact the biggest change. Although the process affirmed the value of what we do and the way we currently teach, it also points towards ways we might refine our practices. The Portrait will guide teachers in creating more varied forms of assessment designed to measure particular skills. Lab practicals in science classes, foreign language oral exams, writing portfolios, graded class debates—these all reflect teachers’ designing alternative projects with the clear purpose of assess-



► Nancy Demmon '81



## Portrait of a Graduate

ing skills that aren't measured on traditional written tests or papers. As teachers explain their designs to students, referring to those qualities of the Portrait that an assignment might draw on, learning becomes a responsibility shared between the teacher and students.

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*A Jewish student invites a Roman Catholic friend to Shabbat dinner in the Living Room, a communal space outside the counseling and chaplain's offices. Students at Morning Meeting listen to an upper mid explain his Independent Study Project on the conflict in the Middle East.*

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None of the items in the Portrait are revolutionary. More, they refine and expand on the same ideals that Horace Dutton Taft first identified as goals for the school. The difference lies in the necessity of students' exhibiting their understanding of these qualities—not through their work on any single test, but through demonstration in their daily actions. If a mid, noting a new student sitting alone in the dining hall, goes to sit with that new arrival and make him or her feel comfortable, that reveals an awareness of the importance of community and the active role of the school's motto. A senior who independently researches the Biblical allusions in a James Joyce short story

and shares her findings in class demonstrates intellectual curiosity, respect for her classmates, and her willingness to work on her own to solve academic problems—even when those problems aren't assigned by her teacher. We, as faculty members, will need to actively recognize these moments, to teach students to be aware of and reflect on the ways they exhibit these ideals every day. As they learn to recognize the Portrait in their own actions, they will more often recognize these behaviors in their peers, creating a stronger community with clearly defined and shared goals.

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*While checking in lower-school students at night, a corridor monitor notes a tired mid nodding over his list of irregular French verbs. The monitor suggests that the student go to bed, and offers to wake him up early so that he'll have time to finish studying before breakfast.*

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As we continually remind ourselves, the current Portrait is a living document, one which should change and evolve in response to our experience in using it. Designing it has been an exciting process involving the entire faculty and guiding our work going forward. The task ahead—shaping curriculum to provide more creative

opportunities for reflective learning—already has faculty members thinking independently, sharing ideas, designing courses, and reflecting—exactly those behaviors that students will exhibit in defining our community.

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*At her last class meeting before graduation, a senior writes a letter to herself—a required English assignment, but also a chance to reflect on her experience at Taft. She imagines walking across the stage at graduation, and considers the complex, shifting world she will enter. She's ready, she knows, to meet those challenges, to lead positively and meaningfully. She knows this because she's done so; she's already exhibited those qualities that will allow her to continue to do so. She proudly seals the envelope, hands it to her teacher for a later mailing, and smiles.*

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Debora Phipps is the new dean of academic affairs and holds the Holcombe T. Green Chair. She served as chair of the Faculty Forum committee that worked on the Portrait and will assume the position of academic dean next year.

Faculty Forum committee members included Loueta Chickadaunce, Laura Erickson, Baba Frew, Bill Morris, Debbie Phipps, Linda Saarnijoki, Steve Schieffelin, Mike Townsend, and Jon Willson. 🏆

