



## “It’s not enough just to be smart.”

A conversation with Sarah Smith, the new Associate Executive Director - and former Academic Director - about excellence, amazing teachers and mental wind sprints.



Sarah Smith  
Associate Executive Director

**What kind of academic environment did you want to create for the students at Rainier Scholars?** We want a community of scholars.

It’s not enough that each kid excels individually. We tell incoming cohorts that this will be the hardest thing that they have done to date, so they need to be supportive, to build others up. We also want students to understand that you can be smart and cool.

**How do you do that?** I say all the time that we are not doing any rocket science here. We’re using proven best practices that work in small, personalized learning communities to create a positive learning environment. Inspired by the Gates Foundation’s approach to school reform, we focus on the 3 R’s - rigor, relevance and relationships. Rigor is at the heart of everything we do. Relevance: what students learn should be meaningful to who they are as people and to the journeys they will take in life. Finally, you need strong, interpersonal relationships between students and one another, between students and faculty and students and their advisors.

**Who influenced your point of view on teaching?** I became a teacher because I had phenomenal teachers as I was growing up. It was when I was sitting in a classroom at Exeter reading educator and activist Jonathan Cozol that I decided to become a teacher. All of his work that dealt with the achievement gap and lack of equity influenced me greatly. I also have to give credit to Eric Benson, my

principal at Nathan Hale high school. He modeled how to set up an environment where students thrive and can be challenged.

**What kind of teachers do you look to hire?** Those who come with a passion for our mission; who understand and buy into how education is essential in offering choices and creating a new generation of leaders of color. Those who are masters in their subject area and at the same time are always trying to grow as teachers. Those who reflect the diversity and experiences of our students. Those who are comfortable pushing our scholars to think critically.

**What kind of environment do you want to create for the teachers?** The role of the Academic Director is to serve the faculty; to do whatever needs to be done in order to allow them to better serve the students to the best of their ability. Simply put, to allow teachers to teach. I also want it to be an environment where teachers can see the fruits of their labor. We are very intentional about showing them how their work has paid off - whether I reflect that back to them personally or we tell them how the kids are doing in the later years of the program.

**In describing the 14-month academic phase the term “rigorous” is often used. How do you define the term?** It has to do with problem solving. I am not as concerned that you have the right answer as I am with the thought process that you took to get it. Athletics provide a good analogy for the training we put our students through - it’s not unlike getting in shape. It is like mental wind sprints - it’s going to hurt for a while but, when it’s over and you are trained, you are ready for the next level of competition.

**Another term often used is academic excellence. Indeed. Excellence grows out of what we were talking about. It is not just about getting A+’s on everything. Grades and achievement are part of it for sure, but more important is the passion for learning; pursuing ideas for ideas sake, learning because you want to learn. It is not enough just to be smart. Excellence requires a competency beyond academics. Students must also learn the qualities of compassion, humility and mutual responsibility.**

**Why do you think academic excellence leads to better leaders?** Academic excellence demands a level of intelligence that helps an individual discern all the information necessary to make a wise decision. It is about how you learn. If you are not learning, you are not growing. If you’re not growing, how do you help others grow and if you’re not helping others grow, how can you possibly lead?

**Looking back over the past seven years, what has it been like working with your teachers?**

Humbling. And inspiring. To serve and satisfy a corps of teachers as dedicated and talented as ours is definitely intense and ultimately humbling as I try and keep up with them. Their commitment is amazing. Many of them do this - and love to do this - on top of 2 or 3 other jobs. At the end of the day, it is ultimately a privilege because by working together, the belief in what is possible for all children, can become a reality.