

What makes a *great* program of study?

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A great program of study should be (a) good and (b) useful. This means that a good program of study should (a) share [the same characteristics](#) as the good work people do within PHS, and (b) serve PHS's strategic interests.

This document attempts to articulate what that actually means in terms that might actually mean something. It is only a draft. Please include any comments inline and/or share them with alec@powderhouse.org.

What makes a program of study *good*?

A good program of study should share [the same characteristics](#) as the good work people do within PHS. That means it's **meaningful**, **hard**, **deep**, **real**, and **fresh**. Despite appearances, those words mean something pretty concrete to us.

A program of study should be **meaningful**.

This means that it should actually matter to you, independent of the development of a program of study at PHS. This likely means that you'll have already been drawn to and engaging with the ingredients of your program for some time—e.g. it may have shown up as a theme throughout your life, work, or hobbies. Inevitably, the ideas and activities sketched out by your program of study should seem necessary, useful, or fun/beautiful to you or someone you care about.

A program of study should be **ambitious**.

This means that you should be reaching beyond your comfort zone to do it— whether in skills or scope or scale. And the ways it's hard shouldn't be gratuitous. You should, after imagining pursuing it for a few years, imagine yourself as really having grown along dimensions which matter to you.

A program of study should be **deep**.

We mean this in two ways:

1. The first is that the object of your program of study should engage powerful ideas in such a way as to lead you to see old things in new ways. "Powerful" might sound vague, but it

isn't. If an idea is full of power, we must be able to *do* something with it. "What can I do with it?" naturally brings us to consider 1) the nature of phenomena in the world, 2) our own nature, and 3) [implicitly] the nature of what we might want to do. Specifically, this means that a powerful idea is:

- a. ...**fundamental**, i.e. it meaningfully connects to many phenomena in the world.
This is also likely to mean that a program of study is framed in terms of ideas and questions, not fields.
 - b. ...**usable**, i.e. its form and activities are well-matched to our nature.
 - c. ...**relevant**, i.e. it enables us to do things we care about.
2. The second sense of depth which matters to us is the extent to which the program of study engages its object. A program of study shouldn't treat ideas superficially; it should look at them close up, empirically and from first principles.

A program of study should be **real**.

This means the ideas at the core of the program and the work involved in it has **independent standards of performance**, it needn't be seen as a "class" to make sense. This means that it must **engage with the real world**.

A program of study should be **fresh**.

Your program of study should be an fresh—if refined—expression of your own passions, made accessible to enthusiastic novices and colleagues. This means the program's ideas and work must be **coherent**, it must have **internal, conceptual integrity**. This also means it should avoid overly complex, jargon-laden, or otherwise pretentious language, instead expressing your ideas and passions **in your own voice**.

The combination of these suggest some corollaries:

- *deep*, *meaningful*, and *real* programs are likely to **support divergent work**.
- *deep* and *real* programs are likely to **invite active work**. After all, it's hard for something to have a good answer to, "What can I do with it?" without much doing happening.
- *deep* and *real* programs are likely to be oriented around a **concrete phenomena inviting empirical exploration**.
- *deep* and *hard* programs are likely to **support long-term work**. You should be able to imagine working on this for years (and excited when you imagine that).
- *fresh* and *meaningful* programs are likely to be **funky, original, and niche** because they are highly individual

What makes a program of study *useful*?

But, programs of study serve more functions than youth's projects— They are embedded within PHS, and so must serve PHS's aims, as well.

This isn't the place to expound on PHS's strategy, but it's straightforward to observe that ultimately, PHS is accountable to two groups: youth and their families. Functionally, this means we are also accountable to two other groups: the postsecondary paths (college or the workforce) which families and youth care about, and the public school district which authorizes and funds our work with youth and their families.

Each stakeholder suggests dimensions of performance. But these dimensions compete, introducing tensions into our work. We have chosen to do our work in The Real World™, and that means there are realities which constrain and enable our work, just as commercial realities constrain and enable Pixar or political realities constrain and enable criminal justice reform.

Because we don't have much power, we believe the best way to resist dilution or corruption in the face of these tensions requires understanding them deeply to design defenses neutralizing them. That means we aim to take equal pride in our pragmatism and our principles.

This pragmatism means programs of study are called to do more than "simply" be meaningful, hard, deep, real, and fresh— they must address some of the priorities of each of our stakeholders in turn.

Youth

Youth's experience, of course, matters the most. This has at least three, concrete ramifications for programs of study.

1. They must **actively benefit from the involvement of novices and/or youth**.
2. They must **involve ideas and activity which youth will care about**. This suggests that the activities and projects generated by a program of study are likely to be easily embedded in the everyday lives of young people or otherwise culturally situated...because that's how people come to care about things.
3. They must **offer accessible, engaging on-ramps** for youth and novices.
4. And they must **engage a world of ideas and activities with many great projects (by [our own definition](#)) in their vicinity**.

Families

Youth's families care that (1) their kids are happy and that (2) they'll do well in life. This adds to youth's considerations a desire to make sure they are developing the personal and professional

skills which will ensure they flourish in their next chapter. Programs of study can't be held accountable to all of that; however, this means good programs of study will leave youth doing work which families **intuitively recognize as hard and developing skills valuable in postsecondary education or work.**

District

The District cares about standards coverage and test performance. Programs of study should *never* start here, but you *should* be confident that **the activities they suggest are likely to touch on and cover traditional mathematics and/or ELA standards.**

Postsecondary paths

Postsecondary paths' priorities are diverse...inevitably, they are a mix of domain expertise alongside meta-expertise (e.g. critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity). As a proxy for this wooly concept, we believe good programs of study lead to work which will **develop youth's social and financial security through their legibility and marketability.** Whatever may be gross about this, we believe it is core to our social contract and are devoted to engaging that tension.

Beyond our constituencies, programs of study also owe something to Powderhouse Studios itself. Specifically, programs of study should be **high leverage**—they should increase Powderhouse Studios' ability to pursue its mission over time. (For a bit more context on the analogy of leverage, check out [these two](#) posts from Edmond Lau.)

This can mean many things, but four corollaries are specifically worth calling out:

1. Will the program **grow our capacity to build things with computers or tell stories?**
2. Does the program **engage things either considered "advanced" for high school students or which are otherwise highly valued?**
3. Does the program **naturally lead to output which shows well**, *i.e.* are we likely to be able to re-use its output in a reflective or marketing capacity?
4. Does the program **put learning before teaching**, *i.e.* does it concern itself more with how we know than how to communicate what we know?