



# Creating opportunities for today's top young minds

Story by Ken Kempcke. Photos by Jeff Dow.

## *The Davidson Academy*

**W**hen educational entrepreneurs Bob and Jan Davidson moved to Nevada, they not only admired the beautiful scenery of the Lake Tahoe area, they were also impressed with the can-do attitude they found in the state. This attitude was vital to their efforts in the Nevada State Legislature in 2005 when the couple sought the state's cooperation in establishing a new kind of public school for profoundly gifted middle and high school students, The Davidson Academy of Nevada.

The Academy is one of the first free, public schools for profoundly intelligent students in the nation. The Academy was established in August 2006 on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. Although the 2005 legislature passed a bill establishing the Academy as a public school, no public financing was provided and the Davidsons covered the entire cost of its first year of operation and capital expense. The 2007 legislature provided funding for the Academy, matching the state funding given for all other public students in Washoe County.

The Davidsons' motivation for establishing the Academy stems from their view that

highly intelligent young people are underserved in most U.S. public schools. "All young people should have access to an education so they can learn and achieve at a level appropriate to their abilities," Jan says. "Profoundly intelligent young people should not be denied what we desire for all young people. Their special needs should be recognized and accommodated. Rather than be locked into an age-based curriculum, profoundly gifted young people should have the opportunity to be challenged to excel and achieve."

Bob adds, "Approximately one and a half million students, or half of all gifted students, in the United States are underachieving because they are not appropriately challenged in school. As a result of being under-challenged, many of our nation's brightest students are either tuning out or dropping out of traditional schools."

Students who apply for admission to the Academy must score in the 99.9th percentile on IQ or college entrance exams. Personalized learning plans are developed for each student and they have access to University courses and professors.

The Academy's inaugural class of 35 students came from cities across the United States and included a student from Australia. Currently, 44 students are attending the Academy, and the Davidsons hope to expand to a class of 200 students in five years. In addition to 10 full-time staff, the Academy receives constant support from the Davidson Institute for Talent Development (a Reno-based, national, nonprofit foundation started by the Davidsons), a family consultant team and parent volunteers. In May, the Academy expects to graduate its first student, Alexandra Morris, 16, of Ventura, Calif.

"Attending The Davidson Academy has given me the opportunity to study on a level advanced enough for me, in the company of other students who have similar needs and abilities," Alexandra says. "I plan to go on to college as a full time student. My major will be some kind of science, probably environmental studies. I'm interested in many different subjects, but my general goal is to do work in science as a career while continuing my exploration of the arts and the humanities on the side."



Davidson Academy students Rachel Ellison, 15, Andy Wei, 15, Alexandra Morris, 16, Cody Nolan, 16, and Kelsey James, 14, demonstrate their considerable brainpower (page 15) by conjugating foreign verbs, creating ciphers and codes, and translating witty sayings into Chinese-Spanish. Above: The young students pose in front of a whiteboard filled with complicated math problems, which they actually understand.

The Academy offers an alternative for students like Alexandra, who aspire to a greater academic challenge than advanced placement classes or the limited number of college-level classes available at high schools. Courses are taught by state-licensed teachers, as well as professors and instructors from the University and Truckee Meadows Community College.

### Academy on the move

The Davidsons recently donated \$5 million to renovate portions of the former Jot Travis Student Union building to become the new home for The Davidson Academy, which is currently housed in the KNPB Channel 5 building on the northwest side of campus. Any savings in renovation will be contributed to the new mathematics and science center. The Academy is slated to open its third academic year August 25 on the top floor of the old union.

The old student union will still be named the Jot Travis Building and its Pine Lounge will remain open for University functions after Academy hours. The Overlook restaurant will also remain open as a dining option for the entire University community.

Under the leadership of President Milton Glick, who is also a Davidson Academy board member, the University has welcomed Academy students to campus and offers access to University professors, libraries, classes and other valuable educational resources and opportunities. A dual enrollment agreement

between the Academy and the University allows students to take courses for college credit and encourages them to attend the University after graduation from the Academy.

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The Davidsons decided to open the Academy on the University campus because of the quality and enthusiasm of the University's faculty, as well as the campus' willingness to support a long-term partnership. "The Davidson Academy, like the University, is

committed to continuous improvement," says Academy Director Colleen Harsin '98M.A. (psychology), '01MSW (social work). "All the students, faculty and staff at the Academy are tremendously excited to move into the

new facility this fall and see this move as an opportunity to share and grow with the University of Nevada, Reno community."

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One important indicator of the strength of the Academy-University partnership is the number of University alumni employed by the Academy. Out of 10 full-time Davidson Academy employees, five are University graduates. Additionally, 12 of 21 full-time employees at the Davidson Institute for Talent Development are University alumni.

The students currently attending The Davidson Academy of Nevada are already having a positive impact on campus. "University professors tell us that our students enrich their classrooms even though they are younger and many times it is an Academy student who does the best in the class," Jan says. "Such individualized education available in University courses will make school more humane for all students and, particularly in the case of gifted students, will



Photo by David Calvert




Photo by Theresa Dama-Douglas

reap rewards for society for years to come.”

Bob says: “We hope to graduate up to 50 students a year from the Academy. We’re hoping that many will go on to attend the University of Nevada, Reno because they have roots here with their families. If that is the case, the University of Nevada, Reno will, to the best of our estimation, have more profoundly gifted—not gifted or highly gifted—students than any university in the country. I think it really is a great University and I think it has a chance to be one of the premier universities—where it deserves to be.

“We believe that supporting profoundly gifted students also supports our future. Our nation needs talented individuals to compete in the global economy and to continue to provide our citizens the quality of life they currently enjoy. The United States is already being seriously challenged by India and China in math, science and technology. If schools like The Davidson Academy provide an appropriately challenging education to bright students instead of denying them the opportunity to learn, we will build the talent pool of high-achieving, intelligent citizens our nation requires.”

Renovation of the Jot Travis Building in preparation for the Academy’s fall opening began in January. The new home of The Davidson Academy will provide approximately 25,000 square feet of space for new classroom and administrative offices. In comparison, the Academy now only occupies 6,000 square feet in the KNPB Building. 

*Top left: Davidson Academy student Misha Raffiee, 13, during a lab inside the chemistry building. The students were performing an experiment to find the molar mass of a vapor. Top right: THINK Summer Institute 2007 students, Stephanie Ku, 16, Emma Schmelzer, 15, and Daniel Leef, 16, study on the University campus. Below: THINK Summer Institute 2007 students, Top row: Zachary Peterson, 15, Marina Mellis, 16, Reed Molbak, 15, and Antonia Carrol, 14. Bottom row: Esther Kim, 16, Shane Wigton, 16, Laura Bergsten, 15, and Adam Sanford, 16.*

## Why the Davidson Academy is unique:

- The focus is on the individual student, so that each has the opportunity to maximize his or her talents.
- A personalized learning plan is developed to assure each student will be appropriately challenged across all subject areas.
- Students are not placed into classes by age. They are placed into classes that best match their abilities and interest levels.
- In most courses, students may pursue more advanced levels with research options.
- When students are ready to proceed with advanced studies, they may take University of Nevada, Reno courses that are an optimal match for their abilities.
- Academy students report that the social environment of interacting with their intellectual peers significantly enhances their education.



Photo by Theresa Dama-Douglas