

# DOINGWHATWORKS



SAMPLE MATERIAL

## The Senior Year: Smoothing the Transition to College

University Park Campus School, Massachusetts

**Topic:** Helping Students Navigate the Path to College

**Practice:** Prepare Students Academically

University Park Campus School (UPCS) gathered feedback from graduates and redesigned the senior year program to better prepare students for college. This document summarizes the changes, which include structuring classes so they are more similar to college courses, offering seminars to help students transition to college, and providing direct support to students and their families in applying for college and financial aid.

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## Senior Year at University Park Campus School (UPCS): Smoothing the Transition to College

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In speaking with UPCS graduates, the oldest of whom graduated from UPCS in 2003, we learned that although they had the academic skills they needed to be successful in college, they often struggled to adapt to the structure and freedoms of college. For example, they struggled at keeping up with large amounts of reading or studying for mid-term and final exams. They often did not feel comfortable approaching professors for help in office hours.

### Senior Year Designed to Model College Structure:

Concerned by the feedback of alumni, informed by Professor David Conley's research in *College Knowledge*, and with the support of the Nellie Mae Foundation's Partnerships for College Success program, the UPCS faculty redesigned the senior year. The new model aims to bridge the gap between what students typically face in high school and what they will see in college, introducing students to formats and expectations that they will likely experience, and overall emphasizing more independence and self-direction.

The specific changes include:

- **Courses Meet Two or Three Times per Week:** Most of the courses in the senior year meet two to three times per week, as in college. Students complete additional reading and learning outside of class. Teachers expect students to come to class with material prepared for college-style seminar discussions.
- **Semester-long Classes:** Science and social science classes at UPCS are semester-long.
- **Use of College-Style Syllabi:** Most courses use college-style syllabi outlining all reading to be done and assignments to be completed for the semester. As in college, the teacher may not note assignments each day, but students are expected to consult the syllabus independently and complete the prescribed work.
- **Modeling of College-Style Pedagogy:** Teachers adopt lecture-based instruction to model college-style teaching and to help students develop strong note-taking skills. Students evaluate their success at comprehending material delivered in this way and teachers offer strategies to help students develop the meta-cognitive awareness necessary to evaluate their own knowledge.
- **Modeling of College-Style Assessment:** Assessment in senior year courses relies more heavily on a few major assignments. For example, in the Probability & Statistics class, much of the grade is derived from a mid-term exam and final exam at the end of the semester. Decreased emphasis is placed on classwork and homework as compared to earlier grades.

### College Course-Taking Opportunities:

- **Clark University Courses for Credit:** Juniors and seniors may elect to take Clark University courses for credit. This enables UPCS to supplement its rudimentary elective program to offer calculus, advanced sciences, and a wider variety of English, history, and social science courses. Math, biology, and psychology are the most common courses that students take, though the entire freshman course catalog is available to them. About half of UPCS students take at least one course before graduation, with some taking as many as four. UPCS also has smaller dual enrollment programs with Worcester State College and the College of the Holy Cross.
- **Worcester State Courses for UPCS students:** In the 2008-2009 school year, UPCS expanded the college course-taking opportunities for its students by contracting two courses from Worcester State College, open only to UPCS seniors and select UPCS juniors. The two courses, a fall Sociology seminar and an introductory mathematics course in the spring, are taught by Worcester State professors known for their commitment to low-income and first-generation college students. With the addition of the two Worcester State courses, UPCS has extended the benefits of college course-taking to all seniors. This spring, only one UPCS senior will graduate without having earned college credits.

### Senior Course Load

Seniors at UPCS take a rigorous schedule consisting of five honors or AP level academic courses:

- English (AP optional)
- Math: Calculus (AP optional) or Trigonometry
- Science: Anatomy & Physiology or Environmental Science (AP optional)
- Social Science: Government (AP optional) or Sociology
- Elective: Law, Journalism, or TV Studio
- Optional: Clark Course

\*Students wishing to take calculus enroll in math courses at Clark University.

### Transition-to-College Seminars

Students take two courses specifically designed to support their transition to college:

- **Senior Seminar:** Senior Seminar offers a structured time for students to complete college applications, write their essays, fill out financial aid forms, apply for scholarships, etc. The guidance counselor is present to offer students the support they need to successfully complete this process.
- **Senior Project:** Seniors complete a portfolio that includes reflections on their service to the school in Senior Project. The course culminates with an exhibition. Seniors will present an account of how they have grown and prepared for college to younger students at the school. It is designed to promote student responsibility for maintaining the school culture.

### Other College Support Activities:

In addition, there are formal and informal activities that address college transition through the University partnership.

- **UPCS College Awareness Day:** Held for the first time in January 2007, the annual college preparation program brings together students, parents, alumni and university staff for a morning of focused conversation on what to anticipate and how to prepare for it in the college transition. More than half of all juniors and seniors attend this Saturday morning event with their families.
- **Persistent, Individualized College Counseling & Financial Aid Support:** While UPCS faculty and staff have always advised students through the college application and financial aid process, we have refined our approach in the last several years, guided by the experiences of UPCS alumni. In particular, we found that the need for alumni support diminishes when students matriculate to the “right” schools for them, receive adequate financial aid, and complete all necessary paperwork before they graduate from high school. To make sure this happens, we provide individualized and targeted counseling and comprehensive support throughout the process to ensure that students do not fall through the cracks.
- **Assessing and Teaching College Readiness:** To complement the expanded college course offerings and the redesigned senior year, a cohort of senior teachers developed a semester-long course to explicitly tackle the “academic behaviors” and “contextual skills” students need to be college ready. In the course, students self assess their readiness for college and develop individualized college readiness plans to strengthen areas of academic weakness and to improve their habits and skills.
- **Financial Aid Night:** UPCS hosts an evening event in the fall to help students and their families understand the financial aid process including the types of financial aid (grants, loans, etc.) the forms which they will be required to fill out, and the timeline for the process. UPCS holds a spring evening event to help students and their families understand and evaluate their award letters.
- **Mentoring Program:** In their sophomore year, all UPCS students are paired with a Clark University undergraduate mentor who meets with them weekly after-school. With their mentors, UPCS students eat in the cafeteria, attend classes and study sessions, and become familiar with campus culture and campus life in anticipation of their own transition to college.
- **Supporting the College Transition:** In June, 2007, UPCS created the position of College Transition & Alumni Support Coordinator to help track and support UPCS alumni through college. The alumni coordinator helps alumni navigate the challenges of college, from completing financial aid paperwork to finding a tutor to resolving a dispute with a roommate. Faculty use data from the program, including the results of a yearly tracking program, to inform UPCS’ high school design and identify college which best support UPCS alumni.