

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Senior Year Redesign

University Park Campus School, Massachusetts • March 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College
Practice: Prepare Students Academically

Highlights

- The principal at University Park Campus School explains the reasons for the senior year redesign.
- The school has designed the classes in the senior year to function more like college classes.
- Teachers give students syllabi to follow, and tests are longer and given less often.
- Students are expected to ask their teachers for help when they need it. For example, they cannot rely on their teachers to remind them about deadlines and due dates.
- Student who have experienced the redesigned senior year say that they were more prepared for the rigors of college academics.

About the Site

University Park Campus School
Worcester, MA

Demographics

40% Hispanic

32% White

21% Asian

7% Black

78% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

10% English Language Learners

12% Special Education

University Park Campus School prepares all of its students, most of whom will be first-generation college-goers, to succeed in college by doing the following:

- Offering a rigorous, all-honors academic curriculum that starts in grade 7 and focuses on deep thinking and active engagement;
- Collecting and reviewing a range of assessment data to make student- and school-level decisions;
- Implementing a college-going culture and providing supports to help students go to and succeed in college; and
- Providing direct assistance to students and their families in applying, being accepted, and transitioning to college.

Full Transcript

Ricci Hall: My name is Ricci Hall. I am the principal at University Park Campus School, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

What we determined from talking to our alums and surveying our alums and getting this data back was that students struggled with a number of important things relative to their college success. They struggled with mostly academic behaviors, the ability to participate in study-skills kinds of activities, the ability to attend to lectures, the ability to understand the contextual knowledge of college. They had a hard time making office hours with their professors, had a hard time with the volume of reading, had a difficult time managing tests and assessments at the college level.

Hall, to students: One of the things that I have noticed about reading the anatomy book is you can get really bogged down in the details, to the point where you end up losing sight of the forest to the trees kind of thing. So that instead of just opening up the textbook and reading it to try to understand and letting the stuff kind of just go, you are focused heavily on every detail, and that just ends up obstructing your ability to actually learn.

Hall: We found that our students were successful at the thinking that they needed to do in college. They were good analyzers, good evaluators, good interpreters, but they struggled with some of the behaviors that

were necessary to be successful there. When you fall down, what do you do to get support? How do you go find your professor for extra assistance and extra help? How do you get the writing center's assistance for a particular assignment? Those were the areas we felt most of our students really struggled with, and we found that those were skills we could explicitly teach.

Hall, to students: One of the things I want you to think about is how many times in your middle and high school career at this school you have been exposed to essay questions and how many times in your middle and high school career at this school you have been exposed to multiple-choice questions. And I wonder if your inability to do, or your struggle with one versus the other may be just also a matter of exposure, how many times you had it, which may be also something we could think about. Like, is there a way for me to go back and tell the seventh-grade math teachers and science teachers to include some more multiple choice?

Hall: We began by redesigning the way our senior year was experienced by our students. So we began first by having students take semester-long courses rather than full-year courses. We began by readjusting our schedule for senior year by having to meet every other day or three times a week, with a lab or with a discussion group. We have our senior teachers use syllabi and follow those syllabi very carefully, in which the syllabus becomes kind of the driving course behind the entire class. We encourage teachers in the senior year to have midterms and final assessments, smaller number and larger assessments. So the kids can understand the importance of not missing one of those assessments or what to do when you are challenged with it. So those are the main senior year redesign aspects that have really helped us kind of make that transition between senior year/grade 12 and freshman year in college.

Hall, to students: I actually make my class in many ways very different than the textbook reading. Because I have had a number of science teachers, especially in college but also other types of teachers in college, where you listen to a lecture and you listen to their class and they spend 95% of their time talking about something and then you go to their test or you go to their exam and none of that's on there. It's all from the reading, it's all from discussion lab maybe or something else, and so you need to be able to figure out which scenario is the case for you and which one is, you know, which one you are actually in.

Hall: So we really changed, in fact, a lot of the instructional modalities of our senior year classes to really help students along with: How do you pay attention to a lecture when it's going on for an hour, an hour and half, about a topic. How do you take notes in that lecture class? How do you plug into that material in a way that makes it important and salient to you? What are the steps you need to take before going to the lecture? What do you do after the lecture? Those [are] important pieces that we weren't teaching kids. And since our kids are first-generation college-goers, they just didn't have those requisite skills and no one was really teaching it to them. This redesign comes as a shock to kids. They have spent here grade 7 through grade 11 working in a very nurturing student-centered kind of environment, and the shock of the senior year really is meant to kind of get them awake to a new way of thinking about school and a new way to be independent in that process.

Hall, to students: Well I hope, you know, especially as we continue to work towards getting kids prepared for sciences in college and that's been a—as you know, and we have had frank conversations about this—as you know it's been one of our challenges to help make sure that all kids are ready to, if they are interested in studying a science in college, that they are prepared to do so. I am hoping that a lot of this work now with you will help you as you take Bio 101, Chemistry 101. You are going to have this experience already under your belt with me, and that's going to hopefully help you with the skills you are going to need to be successful there.

Hall: Because of that, we have had to support kids along the way when they have minor failures or when they do fall off track. And in fact, we want that to happen in many ways. I want them to have that moment of failure when they are still with us rather than when they are a freshman in college and that failure may ultimately cost them money and ultimately make them off track for college readiness. One good example is a student who doesn't turn an assignment in on time without asking for an extension ahead of time. This is something that's usually taken in a high school class [as a] regular occurrence where a teacher just goes to that student and says, “I noticed you didn't turn in your lab report” or “I noticed you didn't turn in this paper.” Well, in college our students were waiting for the professors to do that for them, and it just doesn't happen that way. Instead you need to you send an e-mail to the professor or go to the professor's office hour, ask for an extension on the assignment. And when students fall down like that here, it's important for us to have them experience that failure to experience what's going to happen and actually experience some consequence to that behavior, so that we can then think about it, reflect on it, and talk about it. And hopefully it sinks in so they don't do it again next year.

The restructuring has changed things, I think, significantly and for the better. What I am hearing now from kids who are coming back, and our alumni survey really supports this, is that kids feel much more prepared for the academic behaviors that are going to be necessary for their success. We have higher percentages of persistence rates in those classes who have experienced the senior year redesign than those that hadn't.