

University Preparatory, VVUHSD, 2019 Distinguished School Narrative

Description:

The mission of University Preparatory is to prepare students for admission to a four-year university. After working with our first graduating class, which graduated in 2010, it was determined that while our students were meeting the academic requirements for admission to a four-year university, they lacked the skills and resources necessary to prepare for the university application process and life beyond high school. At the time, it was our goal as a staff to create a course in which seniors would receive instruction and individual attention as they went through the process of transitioning into the adult world of college and career. The success of this program encouraged us to continue the program despite the fact that we are the only high school out of four comprehensive high schools in our district to require seniors to take such a course.

Beginning with our second graduating class in the 2010-2011 school year, all seniors were required to be enrolled in, and pass, a new course called **Senior Transitions**. The Senior Transitions Instructional team, managed and developed by a team of administrators, counselors, parent liaison, support staff, and teachers, worked together to create a uniform curriculum that exposed seniors to the requirements and necessities for university admission, as well as introducing a financial literacy component based on the strategies of Dave Ramsey. The goal of the team was to ensure that all graduating seniors were equipped with the skills necessary to successfully complete the university admission process and the tools to be successful once they began their post-secondary journey.

Our success with this program is unique to University Preparatory School. The course integrates college and career readiness, life skills, financial literacy, and compassionate service learning. While other schools offer AVID courses and the like, no other school within our district offers anything remotely close to the scope of this particular program.

Although this course was designed and developed prior to the implementation of the district's LCAP plan, aligning this course to the goals of our LCAP was a smooth integration. The goals of **Senior Transitions** are focused on our students being college and career ready, creating an engaging learning environment, and allowing our community to become partners in education. Since two of the three district LCAP goals deal directly with "Building a College-Going Culture" and "Increasing Student Engagement," the course clearly embraces the foundational goals of our district LCAP plan.

Although the curriculum was originally designed as a means of aiding students in the completion of the college application, the course has evolved to include curriculum that encompasses the arenas of personal growth, financial literacy, and college and career readiness. Between each of these arenas, all of the 4Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) are addressed.

At first, not all parents and stakeholders were fully convinced of the necessity of the course, but through the creation of a survey aimed at staff, parents, and students inquiring about their college preparation needs, we discovered students needed tools and experiences that would help equip them to answer real-world questions. Some

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questions included: *How do I write a personal statement? How do I complete a college application? How should I complete the FAFSA form? How do I build a budget and how do I present myself, both in writing and verbally as a professional?*

In order to address these questions, we began a program that focused first on the college application process. While students are not required to actually submit or pay for them, **Senior Transitions** does require students to complete both a UC and a CSU application in order for them to gain familiarity with the broader college application process.

While teachers were initially placed in the program based on openings in their schedule, we quickly discovered this selection process did not always result in a consistent and effective curriculum experience for our students. Therefore, the Senior Transitions Instructional Team, who understood the time commitment of the course, selected core teachers who were willing to deliver a curriculum which focused on support, encouragement, and preparation of students for the many components of this course.

The 2018 California School Dashboard data in regards to Academic Engagement at University Preparatory clearly demonstrates that our school is successful in accommodating our diverse student population in college and career readiness, thanks to our **Senior Transitions** course. Despite 69.8% of our student population falling into the socioeconomically disadvantaged category, University Preparatory has a 99.4% graduation rate, with only 0.5% of our student population falling into the chronically absent category. The success is also evident through our low suspension rate of 1.7% of students suspended at least once, which is a 0.7% decline from 2017.

Implementation and Monitoring:

The Foundation: Many of the students at University Preparatory School are minority students, second language learners, from low-socio-economic backgrounds, and/or are first-generation college students. Statistically, data indicates that these historically underserved student populations are not only less likely to graduate high school, but are also less likely to attend and graduate college. Our **Senior Transitions** program was implemented to address this statistical inequality. Since many of our parents do not have the requisite knowledge or financial means to assist their students with college applications, SAT/ACT registration and fees, or AP testing fees, additional student education was necessary to foster the growth of a college-bound culture.

All three of our Senior Transitions instructors follow the same site-developed curriculum, and they work as a team to ensure that all seniors receive the same exposure to the information necessary to complete a successful senior year at University Preparatory. Teachers also partner with the counselors and the career guidance technician to make sure all students are aware of important dates and deadlines that pertain to college applications, financial aid, SAT/ACT registration dates, and scholarship opportunities. At the beginning of the school year, all seniors discuss, research, and complete a college and career interest inventory so that students can explore a field and place of study that corresponds to their skill and interest level. This also helps students discover colleges and careers that will be fulfilling in their future.

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Ongoing writing is critical to this class, students are required to write, edit, and revise the UC Personal Insight Questions. To aid them in this process, Senior Transitions teachers discuss and decode the essay prompts with students and then review and offer suggestions to help students focus their writing on the prompt. Students are given the opportunity to attend supplemental workshops on *Writing the Personal Insight Questions* that are hosted by the UC system and scheduled by our College and Career Technician.

To help students meet the qualification requirements for the more prestigious institutions, our district instituted the free SAT testing during the school day on campus as part of our LCAP plan. Students are also given one free secondary SAT waiver. Additionally, our LCAP funds help enable AP exams to be more affordable for all of our students, ensuring that all students pay a mere \$5 of the \$94 fee for each exam. Consequently, the number of AP tests administered have steadily increased over the years.

College Applications and Scholarships: Another vital component of **Senior Transitions** is the opportunity for students to draft, write, revise, and receive feedback on UC Personal Insight Questions. Students receive one-on-one guidance as they have time in class to research and complete college applications. Students are also required to complete a minimum of 15 scholarship applications as part of the curriculum, and they receive time and assistance completing their FAFSA. Senior Transitions classes usually spend at least two days a week in one of our computer labs. Students, especially ones without computer access, find online resources necessary to complete their college financial aid and scholarship applications. They conduct research on prospective majors, SAT/ACT registration, and use class time to check university portals to ensure important deadlines are met.

Character Development: While a major focus of **Senior Transitions** is college and career readiness, a secondary goal is to help our students become successful global citizens that leave a lasting impression on the world. Character development plays a significant role in the course, allowing students the opportunity to examine how they represent themselves on paper, in person, online, and in the community. The Senior Transitions teachers regularly pose questions of reflection during character based assignments. Seniors complete resumes, mock job applications, and mock interviews to help them prepare for real-life experiences. We have found that this is an essential component of today's Common Core College and Career Readiness Standards. Teaching students valuable life skills are emphasized throughout the course.

Financial Literacy: Over the past years students came back and shared their experiences with us. We discovered that they were facing large debts that they did not know how to effectively navigate. From this anecdotal evidence, we began to see a need to educate them more fully in financial literacy. An important curriculum component of the course is our financial literacy program.

Although we have been teaching this component in the course since its inception in 2010, with the recent addition of financial literacy in 2018 with the Economics

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standards, we have expanded our existing curriculum and completely adopted Dave Ramsey's *Financial Peace Curriculum* into the **Senior Transitions** program. We have thereby co-opted that portion of the Economics curriculum into this program. Students are required to complete the study workbook that goes with the training videos in the following curriculum areas: management of finances, budget preparation, avoiding debt, use, and understanding of financial resources.

In the course, students are also taught the importance of saving and budgeting, the dangers of credit and debt, the importance of planning for retirement, varied investment options as part of the *Stock Market Challenge*, consumer awareness, money management, purchasing insurance and real estate, and filing taxes.

This has opened up a broad spectrum of classroom discussion and research. Seniors also gain hands-on experience by participating in the *H&R Block Budget Challenge*, a 10-week personal finance simulation that teaches students how to make financial decisions and manage money. As a school community, we wanted our graduating seniors to be given opportunities that tend to be afforded to students of greater means. This meant exposing students to more practical application tasks to ensure real-world readiness. Additionally, this year we are piloting a community-based tax preparation extension course on Saturdays to teach our seniors how to file their own taxes and aid their community in filing theirs.

Community Service: In order to expose seniors to various career pathways, we included a community service project, as a course requirement. Seniors are required to complete 40 hours of community service, with a minimum of 10 hours, but no more than 20 hours, completed on the school campus. The remaining hours must be served outside the school site. A list of approved activities, such as tutoring elementary students, serving at the homeless shelters, or volunteering at the local library, is given to the students during the beginning of the school year. Students may also choose to volunteer for other organizations, for example serving in specialized programs (Toys for Tots, collecting personal items for our U.S. Troops), but must receive prior approval before they begin unique services.

The community service hours allow the students to see and begin to meet the needs of both their school and community. Instilling compassion supports the creation of community leaders and lends to building an effective society. The community service hours also allow students to begin building a resume, and valuable personal connections outside of their high school network.

Creating effective members of the community is crucial to building a strong society. This belief has led to reinforcing the importance of having students give back to their community through community service work hours. Our former students learned the value of investing themselves into others and this is evidenced by their comments made in their community service reflection essays and statements made during their senior presentations.

Senior Presentation: The culminating assignment for the **Senior Transitions** course is the senior presentation. Students are able to choose from four prompts that allow their personal interests to shine and includes a multimedia component that is

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presented to a panel of local community leaders. This three to six-minute experience gives our seniors the opportunity to demonstrate their research, computer literacy, and speaking skills in front of a professional audience, all of which are vital to college and career readiness. They produce a portfolio outlining their transition journey. Provided with industry standards, seniors dress in business attire and are provided with specific guidelines, rubrics, and goals.

To further support this culminating project, in the past year we have also incorporated work experience and life skills under guided practice to ensure a smooth transition to adult life and responsibilities. Students were given the opportunity to attend workshops presented by the Fashion Institute of Design Merchandising on “Dressing for Success” and “Acing the Interview.”

Based on the number of seniors, each panel of collaborators is given approximately 10 senior presentations to watch, assess, and offer feedback. Our Career Technician supports the ST teachers by coordinating the invitations and selecting panel collaborators from community volunteers, parents, and staff. A schedule is then organized and shared, and parents and guardians who do not elect to volunteer for a panel are allowed to observe their student’s presentation, thereby allowing the family to experience the student’s transformational growth.

Our seniors are given the opportunity to reflect on their journey throughout high school through the senior presentations. Exposure to a panel of community members allows our seniors to demonstrate their presentation skills as young professionals. They leave the presentation with professional feedback, a professional portfolio, and a work-ready resume. As an added bonus, depending on funding, two to four top students earn a \$500 scholarship to use at the college of their choice.

Parent Involvement: As a communication and learning experience for parents and spin-off from **Senior Transitions**, we began our once a month *Coffee with the Principal Program* that enables parents to come in and ask questions, voice concerns, and take tours of live classroom instruction. Parents are informed of these monthly sessions throughout the school year.

Throughout the years, we have continued this parental communication via our full-time bilingual parent liaison who arranges workshops for parents, translates documents into Spanish, and maintains the school’s Facebook page so that parents remain informed of important dates, deadlines, and events. One such event is the Parent FAFSA workshop held during first semester every year. This event is coordinated by our College and Career Technician who also meets with parents and students, plans workshops, college trips, and CTE outings.

Results and Outcomes

Throughout the year and part of the PLC collaborations, Senior Transitions teachers meet regularly with each other to reflect, review, modify any curriculum lessons and activities. Additionally, each year the Senior Transitions Team is given the opportunity to assess and reflect on what worked and what needs improvement.

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Consequently, each year the program evolves and grows in order to best serve the needs of our students.

Prior to graduation, each senior is required to complete the *K16 Bridge Program*, a county regional program designed to help high school students transition to post-secondary institutions. Students complete a series of tasks, which include applying to the local Victor Valley Community College, as well as taking *The College Board Accuplacer for Math, English, and Reading* placement. In 2017, 100% of graduating seniors completed the K16 Bridge Program, earning the school the top spot on the *K16 Bridge's "Big Ten Report."*

The scope of our volunteer hours has also expanded throughout the years. Whereas students were originally asked to submit evidence of 20 volunteer hours whose guidelines were unspecified, we have since increased the number of hours required to 40 and placed more stringent expectations on the type of hours students complete. For example, in the past, some students were allowed to complete hours merely by attending catechism classes or for helping a club in which they were a member with fundraising activities. Starting in the 2017-2018 school year, students were asked to step outside their comfort zones and participate in volunteer hours that do not personally benefit them (e.g. this year some of our student volunteers spent 8-10 hours helping the non-profit organization "*Let's Play*" build a playground in downtown Victorville for parents of children in low socioeconomic neighborhoods).

Quantitative data analysis, ongoing since the implementation of this program, indicated from the 2013-2014 senior class, the percentage of seniors who intend to enroll directly into a four-year institution increased from 47 percent to 78 percent from the previous year. Current data indicates that students have continued to maintain this high rate of transition straight to four-year universities.

Upon graduation, a large percentage of students that graduate from University Preparatory enrolls in both two-year community colleges and four-year universities. The counseling department keeps a record of students' post-graduation plans, as well as grant and scholarship money awarded to students. The data below highlights the past few years of success as a result of the **Senior Transitions** Course at University Preparatory:

- In 2016, 114 out of 166 students went on to a four-year university, with 43 opting to attend a community college, and 9 going on to a trade school or the military. The class of 2016 was awarded over \$280,000 dollars of grant and scholarship money.
- In 2017, 126 out of 167 students went on to a four-year university, with 35 choosing community college, and 6 going on to a trade school or the military. There was a slight increase in grant and scholarship money awarded to the class of 2017, with a reported total of just over \$290,000 dollars.
- In 2018, 121 out of 178 students went on to a four-year university, while 44 decided to attend community college, and 13 going on to a trade

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school or the military. The class of 2018 had a drastic increase in grant and scholarship money, with students being awarded over \$466,000 dollars. This number included four full-ride scholarships that students received from Wellesley College, Wartburg College, Brown University, and Cornell University.

Another successful attribute of the **Senior Transitions** Course is University Preparatory School's graduation rate. In 2017, 98.8 % of the original class cohort graduated. In comparison, Victor Valley Union High School District's graduation rate for 2017 was 78.4%. In 2018, University Preparatory's graduation rate increased to 99.4%, with the district's rate growing to 82.1%. It is important to note that 100% of students that started 9th grade and remained through 12th grade at University Preparatory graduated in both 2017 and 2018.

According to the 2018 California School Dashboard, University Preparatory outperforms both the district and state in the number of students that meet the College and Career Readiness Performance Indicator. While the district average is 49.6%, and the state average is 42.2%, 71.3% of our graduates meet the standard.

We believe that our required **Senior Transitions** program can be very successful in high schools with smaller student populations. University Preparatory School's graduation class size typically ranges from 165-180 seniors, which affords teachers the opportunity to work closely with their students.

In sustaining this model program, professional development is ongoing to support the alignment with the Common Core as well as observing other programs across the state. Monitoring our Senior Transitions program additionally is an ongoing process. Securing feedback from all stakeholders, reviewing data, and continuing our PLC collaboration ensures our continued success. Linking this model program, Senior Transitions, to our district's LCAP plan benefits our student population, connects to our parents and community, and supports college and career readiness.

For continuous improvement, the **Senior Transitions** course ensures all students are exposed to post-secondary opportunities and receive one-on-one support and attention from guidance counselors, the career technician, and Senior Transitions teachers, making certain that no student falls through the cracks. On-site visits from college representatives, college tour field trips, career readiness workshops, as well as professional guest speakers from members of the community, have all been welcomed additions to the course.

Many University Preparatory parents are thankful that their students were exposed to the required Senior Transitions curriculum. The father of a recent graduate from the class of 2018 commented *"The Senior Transitions course taught my son about budgeting, to understand the different type of loans he may encounter in college and payment repercussions. It taught him to be aware of debt. I appreciate that it gave him practical, everyday skills that he can apply to his life. I also liked that it allowed him time to work on his college applications and essays and that his teachers provided him with valuable feedback on his entrance essays."*

Over the past eight years, qualitative data has been instrumental in guiding our curriculum content and course changes. Additionally, the best data collection has been

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from former students who have returned for a visit and shared their experiences as a result of this course. Current students also reap the benefits of first-hand dialogue from former students who take time to spend the day in these classes. Two members of the class of 2014 and recent college graduates had these comments concerning the importance of Senior Transitions to their successful completion of the college application process: Esmeralda, a former student, said *"It made the transition to college easier and the class gives you the opportunity to reflect on the person you are and the one you want to become."* Another former graduate, Matthew, shared *"The class allows you the time to really plan for your future."*

Perhaps the most rewarding component of **Senior Transitions** is watching the students' personal growth throughout the course, and providing them with the real-life tools that they need in order to be successful adults. Our students graduate prepared to meet the collegiate demands they face and the financial aspects of life beyond high school. Many of our students derive from home environments that are lower socio-economic, and their parents have not been exposed to educational and financial planning. Counselor Noemi Quevedo-Darling states, *"Senior Transitions is a course that enables us to give pertinent post-high school information to students coming from primarily first generation and low socioeconomic homes. It introduces them to a new way of thinking in terms of education and finance and how it all comes full circle."* She is constantly commenting on how this class is improving her work with students in their successful transitions into adulthood.

In pondering future improvements, we are looking toward expanding components of the **Senior Transitions** course to all grade levels. During grade level staff collaboration meetings, teaching staff has begun the discussion of how to implement college and career readiness curriculum and classroom activities to support the culminating required Senior Transitions course.

Reflecting on the past several years, all indicators support continued investment in the **Senior Transitions** course at **University Preparatory**. As a staff, we are confident that this course leaves a lasting impact on our students, bridging the gap between the senior year of high school, and a student's post-secondary education.