Unlocking your "hidden curriculum" to help high schoolers

eCAMPUS
University of Alaska Fairbanks
TEACHING TIP
1/26/21
BY NIKE BAHR & HILLARY VANSPRONSEN

Over the past semesters, we have welcomed an increasing number of high school students into our courses! You might have noticed this yourself — suddenly, the dynamics of your courses shift and you find yourself questioning your teaching strategies. Supporting high school and dual-enrollment students might require some flexibility on our end, but helping these go-getters achieve a passing grade while still working on their high school diploma is easily achieved by following a hidden curriculum in the form of small additions to your syllabus and basic class setup.

We should keep in mind that high schoolers are not used to the college environment and its required independence. In school, these students are used to regular personal contact with their teachers as well as immediate feedback and help around every corner. When you feel they are disengaged or even lazy, oftentimes they are simply overwhelmed and don't know where to turn for assistance.

Often we see this right at the start of a semester. As instructors, we expect students to log into our LMS, click through the course and find all the information we provide: our contact details, deadlines and late policies. Although this might be the case for some, remember that your high schoolers often don't yet know what to look for when starting a class. To guide them in the right direction, consider adding explanations of rules, policies and deadlines to your course! Depending on your course, you could do this as an FAQ, an instructional video or screencast showing the important parts of your course, or in a first-contact email.

Let us also not underestimate the power of the syllabus. When you send the syllabus to students at the beginning of the semester, you provide them with a handbook to your course. It might not be known to your high schoolers that this document in fact contains all the information they could possibly need, so direct them this way as early as possible. While preparing it, you could also add your FAQ and provide links to important resources such as an LMS help page, a link to eCampus, OIT, Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities, or links to the campus help centers such as a math lab, writing center or speaking center.

Finally, regular communication appears to be a little harder with high school students. Often dual-enrollment students

have an email account through their high school, so it might be worth letting them know that they also have an email account through UAF to which official emails are sent. Besides introducing the basics of UAF email, you can also take away some of the communication obstacles by introducing yourself early in the semester to create a sense of personal connection. When sending instructions, make sure to use simple terminology — not every student is familiar with the specialized terms we might take for granted.

It is exciting that UAF gives high school students the opportunity to earn college credit and feel out different degree paths before even receiving their first diploma. With only a few minor adjustments to simplify the hidden curriculum, you can help them successfully work through your course and gain the confidence of the college student they are.

BY NC SA
After completing her master's degree in professional communication, Nike Bahr stayed at UAF as an adjunct faculty and is teaching online communication courses, while focusing her research on mass media and mental health. Hillary VanSpronsen taught mathematics at UAF for 10 years . She is now an assistant professor at Maine Maritime Academy.
UA is an AA/EO employer and educational institution and prohibits illegal discrimination against any individual: www.alaska.edu/titleIXcompliance/nondiscrimination