
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

2017 School Profile
University Academy-Upper School
Kansas City, Missouri

Transcript: College Readiness Through Mastery Learning and Teaching

Dr. Clement Ukaoma, Principal:

The students who attend University Academy are students who live in the inner core of Kansas City, Missouri. We are at 97% African American. We are also 70% free and reduced. We've had close to a 100% graduation rate.

I think that what's been successful for us are what we call the mastery learning protocol. When I got here 12 years ago, we came to the consensus that we ought to really be making sure that students are learning something, not just earning grades. And how did we ensure that? We said, every quarter you're going to give a student a test called a mastery test. But what's unique about this is that we insist that you reach 80%, that's how we know you've mastered. Part of that is that every teacher in 9th grade through 12th grade, commits to tutoring students twice, two hours in a week. I would say that that is responsible for 80% of what we are able to achieve.

The other thing we do is that once a student enters the 9th grade year, we do all kinds of things to help them acclimate to the mastery learning protocol. By their Junior year, we mandate a course that's called Junior Seminar where they learn all about what college is about, how you get in, what you can do to better your chances of getting into the college that you want. So one of the key things we do in Junior Seminar is ACT prep. And then the senior year, we do Senior Seminar. In terms of curriculum, there's also a requirement that you are doing the core classes all four years. Other things we do that are additional, are we have a nonprofit, Friends of UA. What they do for our kids? They even support a program of travel abroad, students go and live with families for anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks during the summer months.

I think all of that sends a signal to the kids that we are here for them, that we mean business, and then the successes that we've been having helps convince them too that hard work does pay off. One of the things we really started to be excited about is the college persistence rate for the last three years is 68%. [My doctoral dissertation] followed six students who went through here, and they went on and graduated. I wanted to ask them what made it work. And one of the things they said was being prepared, being able to write a paper, being able to connect things that on the face of it aren't connected. But they said it's also about relationships. Everybody talks about how it takes a village, it really does. I think the philosophy works because it involves hard work, it involves persistence, it involves just kind of pulling all your resources together and saying hey, what I'm doing here is important and more over the adults who are guiding me through this experience are willing to help me.