

GETTING SMART ON



CLOSING THE
OPPORTUNITY
GAP

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Introduction

by Getting Smart Staff

CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP AT UNIVERSITY ACADEMY

University Academy is a K–12 charter school, located in Kansas City, Missouri. Founded by philanthropists and community leaders Shirley Bush Helzberg, Barnett Helzberg, Tom Bloch and Lynne Brown, the school opened its doors in 2000 as a middle school with plans to eventually offer high school education as well. By 2005, the school grew to K–12 and moved to a permanent campus just a few miles south of its sponsor, the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC).

Today, the school serves just over 1,000 students, of which 98 percent are African-American and 70 percent are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Over the past six years, the school has risen to become one of the most elite public schools in the state. In 2016, the Upper School (grades 9–12) had the highest standardized state test scores in Missouri, including 100 percent advanced/proficiency on the Algebra I exam. The class of 2015 earned a combined \$6.3 million in college scholarships, as well as the school’s first Ivy League acceptance. Since 2004, 100 percent of UA graduates have been accepted to college, and almost 60 percent graduate with a BA or higher. By contrast, the national average for low income college graduation is nine percent.



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Learning to Soar ~ University Academy is a K-12 college-preparatory charter public school which serves approximately 1000 students that reside in the KCMSD.

So what makes UA different? Is the commitment and dedication of its founders and long-time board members? Is it the 23 community partners that help offer an array of enrichment programs to the students? Is it the high-level rigor of instruction and focus on mastery learning that leads to these results? Or is it a combination of these things and more?

Probably the most important key to UA's success is the mindset and belief that all kids can achieve if provided the same opportunities afforded to those in the wealthiest communities.





The board of directors, administrators, teachers and staff are all focused on providing not only a top-notch college prep education for their students, but also many opportunities to grow and develop as a leader. To do this, the school is committed to extraordinary enrichment opportunities, such as travel abroad programs for upperclassmen, guest artist workshops, robotics programs, summer camps for middle schoolers, and the traditional American high school extracurriculars that many charter schools leave behind. These activities include football, track, basketball, baseball, volleyball, band, orchestra, debate team and academic decathlon. Over time, these enrichment opportunities allow students to develop non-academic skills like leadership, grit, teamwork and competitiveness.

UA believes that it is necessary to address the “opportunity gap” in conjunction with addressing the “achievement gap” because they are interrelated. We think UA offers one of the most comprehensive, coherent approaches to college prep in the country.



10 Ways High Schools Can Contribute to College Completion

By Tom Vander Ark, Getting Smart

Great schools are coherent—the curriculum, instruction, schedule, structures, symbols, supports and connections are all consistent with their mission.

When it comes to a coherent approach to college preparation, [University Academy](#) (UA) in Kansas City is one the [best schools](#) in the country. It is perhaps the best public, open-admission college prep school serving a low income community. It reflects the vision of the founders—which is prominently displayed around the school. UA is committed to closing the achievement gap and the opportunity gap. While UA’s college acceptance and completion rates are remarkable (the average for low income college graduation is nine percent and UA’s is 60 percent), the board wants to see improvement in completion rates. As a result, shared practices, supports and symbols have shifted from emphasizing preparation to emphasizing preparation and completion.

Following are 10 ways that the K–12 UA community supports college awareness, preparation, enrollment and completion that we identified during our visit.

- 1 **Wall of Honor.** The entry hallway at University Academy is full of pennants from colleges that alumni attend. It’s clear, from the moment one enters the front door, what is important at UA.
- 2 **Excellence in early education.** College readiness starts early. That means high expectations begin in kindergarten: 95 percent of UA’s kindergarteners exit at or above grade level in math and reading. A new transitional kindergarten program provides extra time and support for students who come to UA without formal preschool experience.



- 3 **Supported mastery.** High school teachers share a mastery protocol—students must pass each unit of study with a score of 80 percent or better. Struggling students get extra time and support, including access to summer school.
- 4 **School to be proud of.** In many ways, UA strives to be a school young people want to attend. UA has a spectacular facility. They have a great brand and a full line of clothing. There is an athletics and band hall of fame. There is a yearly homecoming parade through the halls of the school to reinforce school pride.

5 Academics first. At UA, academics come first. Practice doesn't start until 4:00 p.m. when academic tutoring is done. UA joined an athletic league of eight other college prep schools with a shared commitment to academics and athletics.

6 Junior & senior seminars. Juniors take a daily seminar course where they build college and career awareness. During senior seminar, students get help with SAT prep, college applications and essay development.

7 Health and family supports. [Children's Mercy](#) runs an onsite wellness center. UA also has a nurse. A free onsite dental clinic, operated by UMKC (pictured below) is used by more than 300 students.



8 Friends. Like expensive private schools, a benefit organization, [Friends of University Academy](#), raises money for students. However, at UA the money is provided in unique ways. To promote college completion, [cash incentives](#) are awarded for grades. For example, a GPA of 3.5 earns \$1,000 per semester.

9 Global travel. With support from Friends of UA, over 70 percent of students in the class of 2017 will have traveled internationally by graduation. For many students it's their first trip out of state. Superintendent Tony Kline said the trips are often life changing and prepare the students to leave home, live independently and feel included at college.

10 Keep top students. Even though the high school is small, Kline and his team work hard to provide competitive programs including electives and activities—it keeps top students enrolled through graduation.

College awareness, preparation, enrollment and completion are the result of a system. University Academy is a good example of a K-12 system designed to propel young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to and through college. UA leaders, teachers and supporters are committed to creating opportunities for kids who have traditionally not had them. Their results show that perhaps the best way to close the achievement gap is to close the gap in opportunity.

Getting Smart Podcast | Good Work at University Academy

by Getting Smart Staff

University Academy's results speak for themselves. We partnered with UA to learn more about how they're able to get these results. We've learned that it comes down to a focus on [closing the opportunity gap](#) in order to close the achievement gap, and [we identified 10 ways](#) the UA community supports college awareness, preparation, enrollment and completion.

During our visit to University Academy, Tom had a chance to sit down with Superintendent Tony Kline and Assistant Superintendent Rebecca Gudde to discuss the UA approach, including teacher recruitment and development and other factors that make UA unique. Tom also chatted with UA Chairman Bush Helzberg about how his family was involved in the founding of UA, and how its original mission has never changed.



Listen to Tony Kline & Tom Vander Ark podcast

Conclusion

by Getting Smart Staff

EDLEADER ADVICE: GET SERIOUS ABOUT GOAL-SETTING

When it comes to closing the opportunity gap for learners, Kansas City’s University Academy stands out as an exemplar. UA’s vision to “be the best K–12 college preparatory charter public school in the country, with an emphasis on college preparation, career development, community service and leadership” is more than a framed print on a wall.

Results confirm that this vision is becoming a reality.

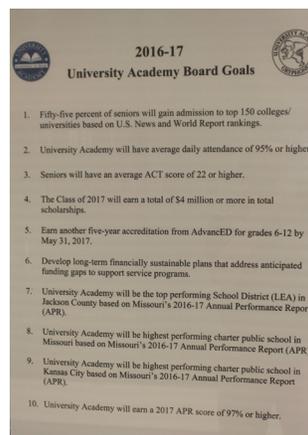
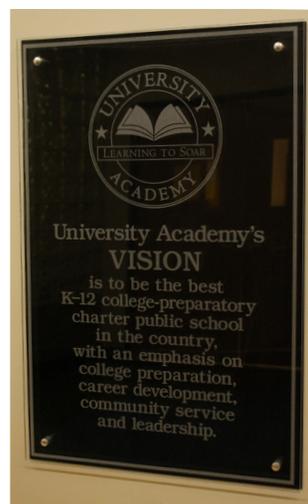
This year, UA earned a 100 percent score on the state Annual Performance Report—a first and an achievement worth celebrating for the students. This is proof that access to opportunity can in fact boost outcomes. For context: in the entire state, only five districts serving K–12 students achieved this score.

UA is not only a great college prep school, it’s a great college completion school. As alumni complete college, UA leadership has been able to monitor the ultimate finish line—college graduation. We’ve shared [10 ways UA supports college preparation and completion](#), which identifies some unexpected and innovative strategies including sponsored foreign travel and cash incentives for keeping college grades up.

Superintendent Tony Kline said that the success of UA started with a clear vision from the founders and is driven by active goal-setting.

Set SMART goals. University Academy’s board sets goals that are specific, clear and measurable for each academic year. Sample goals include:

- » 55 percent of seniors will gain admission to top 150 colleges/ universities in U.S. News & World Report rankings.
- » Average daily attendance will be 95 percent or higher.
- » Seniors will have an average ACT score of 22 or higher.
- » The Class of 2017 will earn a total of \$4 million or more in scholarships.
- » UA will score as the highest performing public charter school in Missouri based on Missouri’s Annual Performance Report.



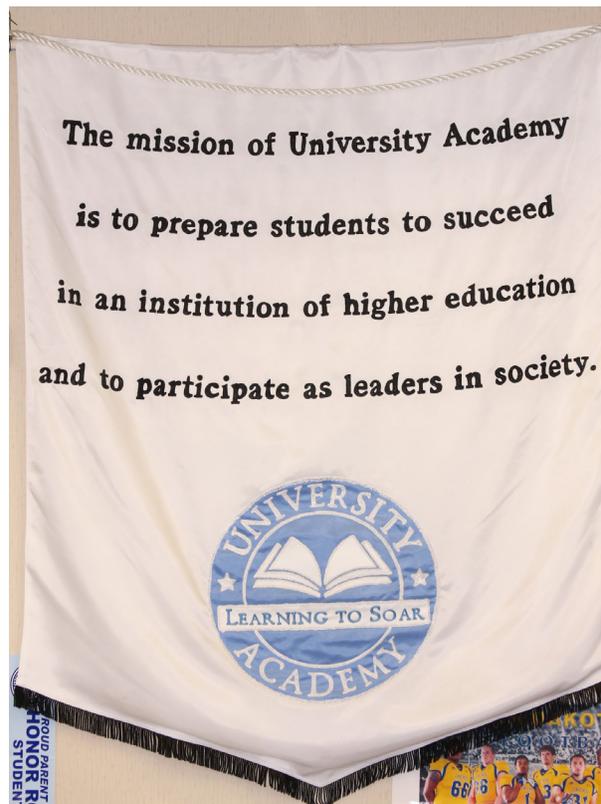
Make them visible. Board goals are shared with the school community and displayed prominently throughout the building.

Provide the resources to make goals attainable. The board and leadership support goal attainment by providing time and resources. [Friends of UA](#) (the school's benefit organization) raises funding to support foreign travel and college success.

Reward success. Half of the superintendent's evaluation is based on goal accomplishment. If the school accomplishes seven of the 10 goals, he gets a 70 percent score for that half of his evaluation. (The other half of the review is based on board member evaluations and a 360 review from direct reports.)

The board chair and superintendent set goals each summer. At least two are stretch goals. Most goals flow from the five year strategic plan.

UA uses a Peter Drucker inspired evaluation system that gives each manager a set of personal goals that are relevant to the individual position and the organization's goals. For example, if the district is supposed to have 95 percent daily attendance, each principal is going to be expected to get 95 percent attendance for their building.



Teacher practice is evaluated based on a thoughtful system constructed by the [University of Missouri](#). Teachers also set performance goals. Feedback on the research-based model and goal attainment determines the size of annual raise. About 90 percent of teachers reached the goals necessary to earn the five percent maximum raise last year.

Maintain a spirit of collaboration. Overall, it's important for everyone—teachers, leaders, students, families and the community—to feel a sense of shared commitment to and responsibility for reaching these annual goals.

We'd love to see more schools expand access for students like the teachers, leaders and UA community continue to do for UA's more than 1,000 K–12 students. We believe that with a commitment like UA's, your school can do the same for the students it serves.

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