

UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL

Small by Design

These days, large high schools can feel like small cities, overwhelming and impersonal. University High School, an independent college preparatory school, has figured out how to make high school a time of empowerment, acceptance and genuine community.

In 1996, students in the Indianapolis metropolitan area seeking a nonsectarian independent high school education faced limited options and prohibitive waiting lists. A group of Sycamore, St. Richard's and Orchard parents decided that an alternative was needed. They commissioned a feasibility study, commenced a nationwide search for a head of school, bought some land in Hamilton County, formed a board and started a new high school. The group sought to develop a different kind of high school, one in which the culture was student-centered and kids were taken seriously and allowed to be partners in their own education. The school needed to be innovative, while at the same time providing rigorous academics and a full complement of traditional high school experiences, such as IHSAA sports and community service opportunities.

University High School first opened its doors in 2000 with 28 students and a handful of teachers who were pioneers in every



sense of the term, navigating a campus carved out of farmland, one small multipurpose building and portable classrooms. "At the time, the school was pretty much out in the middle of nowhere," recalls Nancy Webster, director of admissions and wife of the founding head of school, Chuck

Webster. "Now 116th Street is a central corridor and we are a real presence on it."

University owns 115 acres and in 2007 opened a second 44,000-square-foot classroom building. The school promptly experienced a surge in enrollment



Small class sizes allow for more student/teacher interaction.



The one-to-one laptop program is a popular feature of student life, while preparing students for college instructional technology.

The sense of University as a small, close-knit community promotes exceptional school spirit.



that defied the challenging economy of the next few years. “At the time of our tenth anniversary, while every school around us was cutting programs and laying off teachers, we were hiring and expanding our curriculum,” says Webster. “People have come to recognize that we are here to stay and that we offer something unique and compelling.

An example of that uniqueness is formal faculty mentoring, which matches every student with an adult advocate/advisor. Every staff member, from the business manager to the head of school, serves as a mentor. Far from traditional “home room” groups or guidance counseling, mentors and mentees have 30-40 minute private conversations semi-monthly, ranging from class overviews to sometimes-intense personal situations. Between mentoring sessions, mentors typically interact with their mentees on an almost daily basis, in part because the school is small enough to make that possible. In addition, teachers at University teach only four classes; time for mentoring as a substantive part of each student’s curriculum is built into the day.



While class sizes are small at University, what matters even more is the total number of students a teacher has, typically fewer than half the number of students that teachers at larger high schools have. This means that University teachers know students more intimately, have more time and energy for differentiation, can assign more substantive work, and are able to provide more thoughtful assessment.

Other signature programs of the school include a three-week January Term intensive,

and a four-year, highly personalized college counseling program.

As progressive as the school is, what makes it work is still pretty old-fashioned,” according to Webster. “It’s all about community. It really does ‘take a village,’ in the very best sense of the phrase.”

University offers rigorous academics in a supportive, student-centered environment.

Track and field is among fifteen boys and girls IHSA teams.

