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Olympus Academy: Implementing Student-Led Courses

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Goals and Objectives

Olympus Academy is the solution that a team of students from School for Advanced Studies – North presented the Aspen Challenge Miami in 2022, earning second place in the solution showcase. Olympus Academy represents their vision of the “school of the future,” a place where education is democratic and where learning is celebrated.

Olympus Academy aims to develop agency in students by putting them in the driver’s seat of their education. When students are empowered to develop and lead courses, they inevitably become more engaged in the process of learning, they become more connected to the school community, and their self-esteem is bolstered. Students bring a whole wealth of knowledge and understanding that is often undervalued by the school system. Olympus Academy provides an alternative that elevates and values what our students know, what they are curious about, and what they are willing to share with others.

This project can be adapted to lower grades, yet the level of teacher involvement will vary depending on student age group. Moreover, an Olympus Academy can be adapted to suit the needs of any school and can involve everything from an individual classroom with few students to an entire school.

Implementing Olympus Academies improves student engagement in academic programs by providing peer-to-peer learning opportunities in high interest areas for students. Moreover, while honing their teaching skills, students developed confidence in their abilities and empathy for teachers whose challenges they experience.

Sample Florida Standards

Olympus Academy spans the entire curriculum and all grade-levels, plus it can go beyond required coursework, therefore, listing standards is not applicable. However, here are some standards addressed through the implementation of an Olympus Academy:

G.K12.4.2.3c: Critical Thinking – Perform: Use inductive and deductive thinking processes to draw conclusions.

SC.7.N.1.4: Identify test variables (independent variables) and outcome variables (dependent variables) in an experiment.

LAFS.910.RH.1.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

LAFS.9.10.SL.2.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

MAFS.K12.MP.1.1: Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.

SS.912.P.12.2: Define processes involved in problem solving and decision making.

Project Outline

Olympus Academy is “school” created of, for, and by students. Drawing from the Funds of Knowledge Theory, as well as the work of Freire and Vygotsky, Olympus Academy aims acknowledge and celebrate the knowledge and insight students bring into the classroom. At an Olympus Academy, students become the teachers, sharing their genius with their peers through student-centered, inquiry-based learning. Using a framework created by the School for Advanced Studies North Aspen Challenge Team, Olympus Academy allows for the development and delivery of student-created and student-led courses that respond to the academic and learning interests of a school’s student body. Akin to Genius Hour, Olympus Academies can be implemented at any school, can happen at any point in the school year, and can range in time from a day to several weeks. Most importantly, the Olympus Academy framework gives students a tool to engage in their education and celebrate the joy of learning.

To implement an Olympus Academy, teachers recruit teams of students interested in teaching mini-courses to their peers. Students identify interest areas through surveys and interviews, and then narrow down their Olympus Academy course offerings. Then, students work to develop the content of their courses with, when possible, the input of partner organizations. Finally, student deliver their courses in either full-day Olympus Academies or over a more prolonged period time.

Since the courses taught at Olympus Academy might exist outside of the standard curriculum, they can include topics of high interest to students, such as mental well-being, environmental conservation and advocacy, creative writing, crafting, home-economics, and financial literacy. Moreover, putting the student at the center of curriculum design allows students to take ownership of their learning while connecting with the concerns of their peers.

The inaugural Olympus Academy was implemented during Spring Break 2022 by eleventh and twelfth graders at the School for Advanced Studies – North. Eight students were involved in organizing the courses, and thirty students attended as participants. Student organizers dedicated two weeks to course development, allowing approximately five hours per week. Students met after school and during school breaks to develop and disseminate interest surveys, design and develop their courses, recruit participants, and handle the logistics of implementation.

What follows is the handbook students created for implementing an Olympus Academy. The questions can serve as prompts for students to consider when planning and implementing their courses. A version of this handbook as well as the slides and guidelines for the fully implemented Olympus Academy can be found at:

https://www.olympusacademy.info/home

Handbook: Talking to Your School

To become an Olympus Academy partner, you need to speak to your school administration and get their approval. Our team will also work with you to get your school on board.

We also require that students find a teacher at their school to sponsor their mini curricula. It's important that you have an adult at your school that is aware of what your team is working on. **Sponsors will act as a point of contact between us, student teams, and their school administrations.** Remember, they will NOT be teaching the mini-sessions, as they are still student-led.

Sponsors

Olympus Academy sponsors are meant to serve as points-of-contact between their teams, our team, and their school's administration. Sponsors will oversee the organization of Olympus Academy mini sessions at their respective school. Keep in mind that this is mostly a hands-off position, as the point of Olympus Academy is to put education in the hands of students and prevent teachers from taking on even more responsibilities.

Sponsors should regularly communicate with their teams to keep updated on their progress. Our team will also have meetings with sponsors and their respective teams to receive updates. Sponsors should also make sure that their school's administration is aware of any major changes. Should their team need support from the administration, it is also important that sponsors bridge that communication.

Schools

Olympus Academy partner schools should support their teams when needed. Although their team's sponsor is mostly responsible for facilitating communication, the administration should pass on any important information/relevant updates to them as well.

Handbook: Setting Realistic Goals

It's important to set goals for your team and for your curricula. Some questions you can ask yourself are:

- How many students do you want to teach?
- How many students can you teach?
- Who will be teaching on your team? What will you be teaching?
- What materials will you need for your mini sessions? How much do they cost?
- During what time/days are your participants available for your mini sessions?
- How many mini sessions will you hold?
- What are you trying to accomplish with your mini sessions? How will you measure success?

Sending surveys to potential participants is a great way to answer many of these questions. Building your sessions *around* your participants and not the other way around helps with engagement. You want to ensure that students can participate in your sessions as much *as possible and as long as possible.*

Discussing these questions with your sponsor, your team, and your school are crucial to making your mini-sessions successful. Dream big but remember to think realistically about what you're trying to achieve. **Make sure that your sponsor and your school are aware of your goals so that they can support you.**

Handbook: Teamwork

You and your team will have to work together if you want to make your mini sessions a success. **It's important to hold meetings regularly and discuss your action plan before you carry it out. There are a few things you should consider as you move forward:**

- Being specific about your tasks
- Dividing tasks and roles
- Communicating frequently and efficiently
- Setting deadlines for yourselves
- Holding each other accountable
- Being supporting if someone on your team needs help
- Documenting what you discuss
- Keeping note of each other’s strengths and weaknesses

There's a lot that goes into making sure that a team is efficient. **Communication is perhaps the most important way to accomplish this; miscommunication or a lack of communication can lead to lack of progress and avoidable mistakes.** Creating a group chat, sending emails, or meeting regularly in person are all great ways to stay on the same page.

You might even want to consider some teambuilding exercises. It might sound cheesy and unnecessary but getting to know the people you're working with is an excellent motivator. Furthermore, it's also important to keep each other updated on what the other is working on. Make sure that *everyone* feels like a part of the team and that no one is left out.

Handbook: Recruiting Participants

Every school is different in the way they opt to communicate with their students. If you go to relatively small school where you are close to the administration and teachers, you may have no problem sending a mass email or spreading info through word of mouth to students. However, that might not be possible at a large school. **Here are a few things to consider when trying to cultivate an interest in your own Olympus Academy mini sessions:**

- How large is your school?
- How familiar are you with teachers, staff, and administration?
- Is there a club or clubs where you speak to students and give them information?
- What is the best way to communicate with students at your school?
- How many students are you trying to teach?

Also keep in mind that you will want to tell *as many students as possible* about your mini sessions. Chances are that not all or even most of the people you ask will say yes to participating. **Surveys are also a great way to garner interest for your sessions**, regardless of what size your school is.

Handbook: Building Your Curriculum

When deciding what your curriculum will look like, there are a few factors to consider. You will need to consider:

- **Cost** - how much will the materials for your course cost?
- **Availability** - when are your participants, team, and sponsor available to meet?
- **Appropriateness** - are your subjects appropriate for the age group you're teaching?
- **Interest** - will your participants be interested in learning your subjects?
- **Approval** - do you have approval from your administration and sponsor to teach your subjects?

The key word is *practicality.* In other words, can your mini sessions realistically be held? **Keeping in mind your constraints is crucial to ensuring the success of your courses.** Don't ignore your constraints, but plan around them.

Handbook: Teaching Your Curriculum

Since you and your team are only high school students, it's understandable that you might be unsure as to how to teach your courses. If this is the case, try and consider your team's weaknesses and strengths. In other words, think about:

- **Suitability** - what subject does each member of your team know how to teach best?
- **Modality** - will a virtual, in-person, or hybrid model be best for maintaining student engagement?
- **Complexity** - are your subjects simple enough for you to explain, yet complex enough to be engaging and provide useful information?

Answering these questions will help you determine the best way to teach your courses. **Furthermore, even though your courses are supposed to be student-led, you can also reach out to experts or professionals to present as guest speakers or give input on your lessons.** It's important to note that they should NOT be the focus of your courses, but rather a helpful supplement.

Practice teaching your lessons with your team. Give one another constructive feedback on pacing, clarity, engagement, and fun. You have plenty of experience sitting in classrooms, on sports teams, in musical groups. Draw from those experiences as you prepare.

Handbook: Getting and Using Feedback

Student feedback is essential to building your mini-sessions and keeping them engaging. You want to keep your participants' needs and wants in mind. Olympus Academy is **student-oriented** in all aspects, meaning that you should get student input before making a big step or change. For this reason, **pre-surveys, post-surveys, interviews, and feedback forms** are great tools to utilize while planning and teaching your curriculums. Keeping student feedback organized is also important; you can do this by using software like Google Docs, Google Sheets, Excel, and more. Questions you might want to ask students include:

- What subject(s) are you most interested in learning?
- When are you available to attend our mini sessions?
- How satisfied are you with our teaching/courses?
- How engaged were you while being taught?
- What are some ways we can improve?
- Do you prefer project- or lecture-based learning?

You should ask questions according to the purpose of a given survey. If you want to get feedback from students *after* you've already taught your courses, ask questions about their experience. **Collaborating with your team to create good surveys is essential. You don't want a survey that:**

- Confuses participants
- Is too long
- Is too short
- Asks repetitive questions
- Does not give your team useful information
- Asks biased questions

Finally, remember to incorporate your feedback into your mini sessions. Gathering feedback is one thing but acting on it is another. There are many ways you can do that, depending on the nature of your feedback. Work with your team to ensure that you're deciding on the best way to proceed with the new info you have.

Handbook: Securing Assistance

Sometimes your team will need help, and that's totally ok! **Your team may not have all the tools necessary to carry out your mini sessions. In that case, reaching out to our team, your sponsor, and your school administration is important.** Some areas you may find yourself needing help in include:

- Funding
- Reaching out to students
- Reaching out to professionals
- Planning your curriculum
- Finding a space to hold classes

Chances are we can help you resolve whatever issue you're having. Remember that Olympus Academy emphasizes teamwork, team building, and networking. Below we've also listed some resources that you can use on your own.

Handbook: Useful Resources

Grants

You can ask your school or sponsor to apply for grants on your behalf through a variety of foundations. If you choose to form a nonprofit, your team can also directly apply for funds (keep in mind, only people 18 or older can create nonprofits). **Here are a few places where you may be eligible for grants:**

- The Children's Trust
- The Miami Foundation
- McCarthey Dressman Education Foundation
- KidsGardening (for horticulture/garden-related courses)
- Dollar General Literacy Foundation (for literacy-related courses)
- Association of American Educations Foundation
- Walmart

Databases/lists for searching for grants and awards:

- GetEdFunding
- American Federation of Teachers
- Teach.com

You can search for other grants online as well. Keep in mind that many require submitted proposals and written action plans. If you're willing to put in the work and wish to make your curriculum even bigger, grants are a great way to procure funding.

Fundraising

Your team, your sponsor, or your school can fundraise for educational materials by creating a fundraising campaign through a website. Outreach will be very important to ensuring that people find out about your campaign and donate to it. Some websites where you can do this include:

- DonorsChoose
- Classful
- Patreon
- GoFundMe

Surveys

Our team usually uses **Google Forms** to survey participants and to gather feedback. It's free, easy to use, and is even customizable with the add-on and script features. To easily log the data from your Google Forms, you can attach a **Google Sheet** at the upper right of the responses tab. Every user's response to every question on your survey is automatically added once they submit their form.

Educational Materials

There are countless websites that you can use while building your curriculum. You can include them directly in your courses, reference them for your lesson plans, use them to become more educated on a subject, or use them for projects. Here are a few you might find useful (and all are free!):

General

- Khan Academy
- edX
- Coursera
- Open Culture
- Udacity
- Crash Course *(lesson videos)*
- Instructables *(DIY tutorials)*

Coding

- Scratch *(block-based coding)*
- Processing.org *(download Processing)*
- p5.js *(download p5.js or use web editor)*
- Python.org *(download Python)*
- Java.com *(download Java)*
- Atom *(editor)*
- Code::Blocks *(editor and code compiler)*
- Eclipse *(editor and code compiler)*
- DevDocs (documentation)
- MDN Web Docs *(documentation)*
- freeCodeCamp *(exercises + lesson videos)*
- The Coding Train *(lesson videos)*
- Academind *(lesson videos)*
- CS Dojo *(lesson videos)*
- W3Schools *(documentation + tutorials)*
- HackerRank *(exercises)*
- Codecademy *(exercises)*
- Github *(create repositories; hold all your project files)*

Reading/Literature/Writing

- Project Gutenberg *(free eBooks)*
- Libby *(free eBooks)*
- Open Library *(free eBooks)*
- Hemingway App *(proofreader)*
- Write or Die *(writing editor that forces you to write)*
- The Most Dangerous Writing App *(deletes your writing if you stop)*
- Writer's Digest *(tips and tricks for writing)*
- The Write Practice *(tips and tricks for writing)*
- Evernote *(note-taking)*
- WordPress *(publish your writing for free)*

- Medium *(publish your writing for free)*

STEM

- Code/Art *(lesson videos)*
- Code.org *(Hour of Code lessons)*
- 3Blue1Brown *(lesson videos)*
- Kurzgesagt *(lesson videos)*
- minutephysics *(lesson videos)*
- Numberphile *(lesson videos)*
- Veritasium *(lesson videos)*
- SciShow *(lesson videos)*
- MinuteEarth *(lesson videos)*
- MIT Blossoms *(lesson videos)*
- ASAPScience *(lesson videos)*
- PhET *(online interactive simulations)*
- Planetarium *(online planetarium)*
- Compound Interest *(chemistry infographics)*
- C&EN *(chemistry articles)*
- Tinkercad *(3D design modeler)*
- All About Circuits *(online textbook for learning electronics)*
- Adafruit *(learn section - tutorials for electronics projects)*
- SparkFun *(learn section - electronics tutorials)*
- CircuitLab *(circuit simulation and schematics)*

History

- Joe Scott
- Crash Course
- Heimler's history
- PBS learning Media
- Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
- Chicago History Museum
- Big History Project
- World History for us All
- BBC history
- History Teacher
- The History Place
- Education Word
- National Archives

Horticulture

- American Horticultural Society (*Gardening resources)*
- What is Horticulture? (*lessons)*
- Introduction to Horticulture (*tutorial)*
- Thought Co. (*The meaning of Horticulture)*
- Institute of Food and Agricultural Science-UF (*Gardening solutions*
- Artful Homemaking (*Gardening for beginners)*
- A Cultivated Nest

- Graceful Little Honey Bee (*more resources for beginner)*
- Garderners edge (*Gardening tools and equipment)*
- *Gardening tools vocabulary*
- Seed Your Future (*Gardening careers)*
- Horticultural Societies (*lessons)*
- Vertical Farming

Art and Design

- Eden Gallery (*the different types of arts)*
- Smithsonian Libraries *(database for art and design research)*
- Art Heroes (*the principles of design)*
- Satori Graphics (*layout Design)*
- The Guardian *(arts and design resources)*
- College Grad (*arts and design careers)*
- The talent Bank *(creative personal project ideas)*
- Artyfactory *(free arts lessons)*
- Arts Lesson Plans *(art lessons)*
- Iris Center *(design lesson plans)*
- 99 Design *(website for arts and designs)*
- Colossal *(more arts and design resources)*

Crafts

- Arts and Crafts: an introduction
- Arts and Crafts (*history and types)*
- Listotic *(crafts ideas for adults)*
- Super simple (*list of essential crafts supplies)*
- Hobby Lobby *(how to decoupage for beginner)*
- Slappe Tube (*iris folding card tutorial)*
- Origami with Jo Nakashima (*origami jumping frog)*
- PPO (*origami butterfly)*
- Craft and Crochet *(lesson videos)*
- Craft Council (*crafts careers)*

Film/Cinema

- Swank
- Kanopy
- Crackle
- WatchDocumentaries.com
- SparkNotes *(study notes on various films)*
- University of Chicago *(guide to film and cinema studies)*

Olympus Academy in Action

Our team created mini-sessions—which incorporated three classes in a 1-week long period courses—that would engage students and celebrate the joy of learning. Using student feedback, we modeled our curriculums to be engaging, relevant, hands-on, and collaborative. The three subjects that students said they were most interested in learning were financial literacy, mindfulness with crafts, and coding. Our team designed lesson plans and projects for our participants in these subjects, which we taught throughout spring break, Monday-Friday 12:00 - 2:00 pm. At the end of sessions each day, student-teachers and participants in all three subjects gathered together to briefly touch base. While deciding on the specifics of our school day, we decided to limit lectures to the first 40-50 minutes, with the rest of the time being dedicated to hands-on learning. Research shows that shorter lectures are most beneficial to student learning, which we wanted to incorporate.

In the Olympus Academy implemented at my school, students delivered three courses: financial literacy, coding, and mental health through crafts. In the financial literacy course, students developed a personal budget for their senior year in high school. In the coding class, students created a small game using Scratch, while in the mental health through crafting course, students did arts and crafts while discussing their feelings using protocols that they learned from our mental health coordinator.

To access the curriculum and slides used during the mini sessions go to: https://www.olympusacademy.info/previous-mini-sessions/2021-2022