

importance, whether societal or personal.

## THE CLUSTER SPACE AS HOME BASE

A key component of both the Mentoring and HD programs is the bonding and connections among the group of 12–13 students in each cluster, which are strengthened in the unstructured time that they share every Friday. This relaxed cluster period has been retained from the original advising program and given a more intentional form that involves group activities such as the rose-and-thorn mindfulness game; Pictionary; or “two truths and a lie.” The cluster serves as a kind of family within the school—a group of peers that stays together across all four years and stays connected to its mentor.

Students’ family members have observed the power of this cluster family, which often provides them with a sense that their child is being cared for not just intellectually, but emotionally. Elizabeth Rizo, parent of Sarah Camacho ’19, says of her daughter’s experience, “Sarah has had the opportunity to be part of a little family at school. She has cared for others in concrete ways, enjoying the small and big ways a group comes together. At home, Sarah

has been taught to observe the golden rule: ‘treat others the way you want to be treated.’ The mentoring program is the perfect opportunity to practice towards the individual and the collective.”

Emily Gillingham, parent of Edith Meade ’20, adds that the cluster is “both a respite and a bright spot during intense studying. [It can also] be a time for students to process external events and schoolwide concerns, providing a place to reflect on circumstances that make no sense.” The cluster space supports students by serving as a safe, warm, and regular environment in which they can process the complications of an unpredictable world.

## THE POWER OF UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT

The unconditional support provided by the Mentoring and HD ecosystem is “key to making students feel as if they have a direct source of support, regardless of their circumstances, gender, race, economic status, or level of comfort with themselves,” says Ryan. “Establishing this deep, ground-level foundation is key, because it is the bedrock upon which growth and learning occur. Once you establish that

ground-level trust, you can do more complex work when it is called for—providing a safe place for students to be themselves; providing a firm challenging perspective when students need boundaries; and providing perspective to help contextualize their experiences.”

A 2015 Harvard Center on the Developing Child study found that “[e]very child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.” Providing such a relationship has been shown to increase achievement in a multitude of ways. UHS’s ongoing innovation and leadership in relation to the emotional lives of its students has received national attention, and Alex is often contacted by other schools that are trying to understand what makes the UHS programs successful. When describing the reasons for these programs’ effectiveness, she often emphasizes the power of individual human relationships: the mentors’ individual commitments to be a stable, regular presence for their mentees form the basis of the programs’ shared philosophy and are what make the programs successful.

Edith Meade ’20 reflects upon the growth she experienced after being paired with her mentor: “Before arriving at UHS, I was used to not relying on others for help. I rarely spoke to my friends, teachers, or parents about schoolwork because I was scared. Chatting with my mentor relieved a lot of the pressure that I put on myself, making me become a healthier and happier person.” For Sarah Camacho ’19, working with her mentor, history instructor Jesse Berrett, was just the sort of support she needed, because his office “has always been open for unscheduled, casual chats.” Sarah shared how her mentor helped her with the

scholarly challenges that are endemic to teenage life: “We created a plan, in the spring of my sophomore year, where I would take on less to handle my desired larger course load. My mentor suggested what I should and shouldn’t take on. That academic year would not have run as smoothly without his guidance.”

## SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Alex acknowledges that helping to minimize unnecessary student stress was a driving factor when developing the Mentoring program. A major goal of the program is to reduce “having students lose energy over stress—which is a waste when they could be thinking about a physics theory, who they are, or how to give back.” One of the central truths at the core of the mentoring process is that a healthy, whole student is ultimately someone who is free to access and utilize their full potential as a thinker, an emotional being, and a community member. As teenagers are constructing their identities and their interests, creating a strong foundation is of paramount importance. UHS wants students to walk out of its doors having learned a great amount about themselves and the world around them—not only through the lens of their academic disciplines, but also by learning to process the complexity of their experiences fully and with their own personal flair. With a strong network of support, each UHS student can emerge from the crucible of the teenage years equipped with a sharpened intellect, a fortified sense of self, and an ability to navigate a complex world with grace and care. ■

Mary Ladd and Lyzette Wanzer,  
with special thanks to  
Ryan O’Donnell



Do you ever have days when you find it hard to concentrate because you have something on your mind (or on your phone)? Do you occasionally find yourself distracted by responsibilities such as nurturing a healthy relationship with your partner or caring for your kids or your aging parents, while also managing your own health?

Put yourself in the shoes of a UHS student with a full course load and extracurricular activities, perhaps including volunteer work or a part-time job. Next, imagine that you are making new friends, learning how to date, and trying to keep your self-esteem high while going through puberty.

Teenagers are navigating all of these complexities—some of which are quite new and untested for them—while explosions of growth and activity are going on in their brains.

Helping teenagers to maintain balance throughout this stressful time in their lives is one of the principles of University’s strategic design ([sfuhs.org/strategicdesign](http://sfuhs.org/strategicdesign)). Along with providing a dynamic and challenging education, University has been paying special attention to enhancing its structures and practices to promote wellness, care, and the wholeness of the individual. During the past three years, UHS’s Mentoring program and

its Human Development (HD) program have collaborated and evolved to support these enhancements, as University continues to grow and expand its efforts to foster excellence, educate deeply, and support its students in becoming more fully realized students and citizens.

## CLUSTERS EVOLVE

University’s original advising concept began in its very first school year, in the fall of 1975, as an outgrowth of the school’s original founding vision. The founding trustees wanted to prepare students not just for undergraduate education, but for a rewarding life, in an environment that encouraged risk taking, experimentation, and personal growth for students and faculty. The advising concept centered around a model of clusters of roughly 15 students, who would meet weekly with an adult leader. This leader was intended to serve as an academic advisor who could also respond to personal needs and shape

positive attitudes and behavior. Alumni often remember cluster meetings as recharging or debriefing sessions that occurred at weekly check-ins. These meetings were often relaxed and informal, taking place on Fridays, and serving as a kind of release valve for stresses during the week.

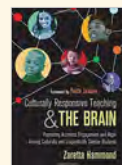
The Mentoring program began when school leaders realized that the advisory relationship between a central adult and a group of students had a wealth of undeveloped potential. First begun in the fall of 2013, the Mentoring program intends to make this relationship a foundation upon which students can build their four-year experience—academically, socially, and emotionally. As a result, advising at University has been transformed from the informal atmosphere of the past into a more intentional program through which mentor adults engage with their mentees multiple times a week, to support students through the many issues they face. (continued)

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Overloaded and Underprepared: Strategies for Stronger Schools and Healthy, Successful Kids*, by Denise Pope, Maureen Brown, and Sarah Miles (featuring the UHS Mentoring program on page 142)



*Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* by Zaretta Hammond





Shoba Farrell, assistant dean of professional growth and development and eleventh-grade mentor, summarizes the Mentoring program's guiding principle as that "every student should feel fully supported and have a definitive go-to adult on campus—ideally, an adult who understands the entirety of the student's experience and remains with that student until graduation."

Time and regularity are important components of the Mentoring program. Mentors' contact with their mentees is especially frequent during the ninth-grade year, when students are navigating new sets of academic and personal expectations. Through this frequent contact with first-year students, the mentor can establish relationships that provide mentees with not only a source of release from the regularity of academics, but also a place to process the ups and downs of the complex social and personal landscape of identity formation. This frequent contact is aided and reinforced by two student peer advisors (PAs) per cluster, who work specifically with that cluster and its mentor. The PAs apply for the role in the spring of sophomore year, and begin their work as juniors, when they are paired with a ninth-grade cluster, which they then work with closely for two years. PAs go through a rigorous selection process, and receive regular training in order to support their advisees and help guide them through the ups and downs of new, complex experiences.

UHS recognizes the importance of giving mentors the time and space to serve as robust support systems, in order to give students the support they need. Recognizing that mentoring ninth-grade students and teaching should be considered equally important, UHS has taken the bold step of providing a full course relief for ninth-grade mentors to do the

# ANOTHER LAYER OF SUPPORT

*Meet Corinne Limbach, University's new director of health, wellness, and leadership, who joined UHS in August 2018. Corinne is responsible for promoting the mental and physical well-being of all students and leading trainings on relevant topics for the school community, including faculty and staff, the forty junior and senior peer advisors, and student leaders.*

Corinne's areas of expertise define her new role: sexual health and consent, substance abuse, sexual identity, gender identity, and mental health are all hot, and vital, topics for today's students. Corinne also incorporates the HD course material for ninth- and tenth-graders into her work as the point person supporting junior and senior peer advisors—for instance, training them as they prepare to deliver the HD curriculum in clusters.

Corinne comes to us from Huckleberry House, where she spent four years focused on crisis remediation and crisis intervention for teens from all walks of life. Relationships with clients could last just a single day or continue for as long as three weeks.

"I found myself searching for the ability to develop long-term lasting relationships with teens, wanting to nurture and witness their growth throughout their adolescence," Corinne says. "I kept returning to my own high school experience, as a peer health educator. That work was fundamental for me, and, in fact, made me want to be a doctor. But after two years studying osteopathic medicine at

Western University of Health Sciences, I realized that I wanted to have more intimate client relationships than I could have as a physician."

Corinne started her professional career as an AmeriCorps National Service Volunteer with Bay Area Youth Agency Consortium, working with youths who had been deeply impacted by stressors and obstacles. "Working in settings with youths in crisis taught me to engage with youths and families on a deep and genuine level, because authenticity gets youths to buy in.

That skill translates to teens from every background, and as a proud alumna of the College Preparatory School, I instinctively understand the culture of a small, independent secondary school like UHS."

As part of the interview process, Corinne met in a group setting with UHS peer advisors. Corinne heard firsthand that students "want someone who will speak with them openly and honestly about sex, mental health, and drugs," and she's up to the challenge.

"I am extremely impressed by the design of the Mentoring program at UHS," says Corinne. "We take for granted how difficult it is to talk to teenagers about sex, substances, mental health. UHS HD faculty are already talented communicators who have self-selected for their role and have gone on to master the skills to have challenging real-life conversations. I am proud to be joining the team."



Students in Ryan O'Donnell's cluster: Emily Lai '20, Hector Castro '20, Carlos Jaramillo '20

important and time-consuming work that is asked of them in their mentees' crucial first year of high school. Additionally, all new mentors participate in an intensive weeklong training in August, meet weekly as a group, and receive individual support from a mentor coach. These training and support efforts give mentors the skills and time to serve as the central hub of support for each of their mentee students, and to get to know these students deeply. Dean of Students Alex Lockett compares the Mentoring program to providing "primary care," rather than the "urgent care" that may be needed if students lack a regular, clear support system.

A breakthrough moment in the design of the Mentoring program came when the program designers realized that adults need as much support as they are expected to give. To that end, mentors are supported by a mentor coach—a dedicated point person who supports the team of mentors and guides them through the process of supporting the whole student. Schools often mistakenly assume that a teacher should just *know* how to effectively support students outside the academic purview. While many of the skills of mentoring and teaching are complementary, it can take a real shift for teachers

to realize that, often, the best support that they can provide as a mentor is to just listen and stay curious, rather than jumping to resolve a given issue or provide an answer. "Mentors report that their teaching practice has been transformed by their mentoring role," Alex says. "Insights into the entirety of the student experience, adolescent development stages, and skillful engagement with challenges have all contributed to a more satisfying teaching experience for adults and students."

## INTEGRATING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

University's four-year Human Development (HD) curriculum includes five key sectors: developing metacognition (awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes), building equity literacy, maintaining mind and body wellness, community engagement (sometimes known as "service learning" at other schools), and a college counseling experience that emphasizes self-discovery. The curriculum supports cognitive, social, and emotional development through experiential, project-based learning.

Early in the Mentoring program's evolution, the HD

faculty recognized that clusters could be an ideal venue for examining complex and often personal topics. Tenth-grade cultural competency discussions on bias, inequities, privilege, and beliefs can be especially complex for students, due to the sensitive nature of the topics. Tilda Kapuya, director of equity and community and chair of the Human Development department, notes the challenges of addressing such topics in large settings: "Before HD became an academic department four years ago, the programs related to learning and metacognition, health and wellness, equity literacy, community engagement, and college counseling were delivered in grade-level meetings in the theater. Theater seating is not conducive to helping students share experiences and concerns within a safe, personalized environment. Mentors truly know the teens in their cohort; they can see who is in the room, and assess and understand how students are participating." Thus, mentors were enlisted in the facilitation of certain key HD lessons in ninth and tenth grades, and HD faculty worked in tandem with mentors to both develop and implement the lessons.

Tilda uses the metaphor of an "ecosystem of support"

to describe the goal of the partnership between the Mentoring and HD programs. Addressing issues such as privilege, racism, and inequity on a local level can become deeply personal and troubling for both students and teachers. Supporting students in addressing these issues supports their development and use of critical thinking skills and social and emotional tools that will serve them well throughout their teen years and beyond. "We feel an institutional responsibility to help students be well and whole, as well as have integrity and a sense of agency when navigating the waters of bigotry and bias," says Tilda.

English instructor Ryan O'Donnell serves as both an eleventh-grade mentor and a mentor coach. Working with the HD curriculum has allowed Ryan to address and interpret national and worldwide issues in real time with his cluster, exploring these issues with a greater depth of collective thinking and potential action. While facilitating a lesson exploring the white nationalist march in Charlottesville and the ensuing violence, he was moved by the level of trust and care that his cluster exhibited: "One student took an exceptionally long time absorbing the articles we used as a springboard for our discussion and was responding with disbelief and confusion. Multiple students stepped in, trying to explain why they thought such things were occurring, and helping her to process them. It was powerful to be present at a moment when a student was encountering information about this event for the first time, and to help make sense of a complicated moment." As this anecdote illustrates, the small cluster group, with its tendrils of care and support, has proven to be an ideal place to process complex issues of