

ADVANCED ACADEMICS

*Pioneering an innovative
teaching model*

AN EDUCATION CASE STUDY

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“I enjoy my job. I look forward to coming to work everyday and getting that ‘aha’ moment where I know I’ve taught someone something... As I work here, I’ve noticed that I really can address students individually and personally. And I teach. That’s what I do all day. I teach.” –Mikie Gillmore, Advanced Academics English teacher

At 7 a.m., Mark Miller arrives at the small, renovated warehouse in Oklahoma City’s vibrant “Bricktown” district where he has taught middle and high school social studies for the past 10 years. He rides the elevator to the seventh floor. But instead of entering an individual classroom, he walks into a large, open space that contains roughly 90 cubicles.

Several teachers are already at work in their cubicles communicating with students—via the Internet. One math teacher is simultaneously instant messaging with four different students using a virtual whiteboard, where she and her students sketch math equations on the same electronic surface. She seamlessly helps one student find the perimeter of a triangle, another student solve rational functions, a third student solve a word problem for subtracting fractions, and a fourth student review for a test on linear and quadratic functions. Meanwhile, an English teacher is taking advantage of the early hours to grade student essays before the 8 a.m. student rush begins.

Mark sits in his cubicle, which is decorated with photos of his family and other personal memorabilia. He turns on his dual-monitored computer and checks his email. He has already received nine emails from students with questions about various lessons and assignments. As he begins responding to each of the emails, the phone rings. It is a student in Minnesota who has a question about an economics assignment. Although Mark is certified in economics, it is not his forte. Luckily, Jonathan Helsel, who sits in the cubicle across from Mark, is the economics guru for the department. After consulting with Jonathan about the student’s question, Mark returns to the phone and proceeds to help the student understand the concept by giving him examples and directing him to other material within the course. When Mark senses that “aha” moment—that moment when the light bulb turns on inside the student’s head—he smiles and thinks to himself, “I love my job.”

It does not look like a typical “school,” but the warehouse is the headquarters of Advanced Academics, an online school that partners with more than 200 school districts and charter schools in 30 states to provide comprehensive middle and high school courses, highly qualified teachers, and a web-based learning management system. Since its inception in 2000, the for-

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profit company has delivered online courses to more than 90,000 students. Its students include a range of young people. Some have dropped out of traditional high schools. Others simply prefer the flexibility of learning at their own pace at home. Still others attend traditional schools, but want Advanced Placement classes that their own school cannot offer.

How the Advanced Academics teaching model works

The seventh floor of the warehouse is home to a team of roughly 100 teachers who provide one-on-one help to students as they work through online lessons or complete assignments.* Although some of this help occurs through email and phone calls, the majority takes place through written instant messages, called “chats.” The teachers estimate that they spend anywhere from 75 to 98 percent of their workday “chatting” with students. The remainder of their time is devoted to grading essays and written assignments, making weekly phone calls to students whose states require them, applying for additional teaching certifications (most teachers obtain certification in roughly 10 to 15 of the states in which Advanced Academics has the most students), and responding to emails and phone calls from students.

Although all of Advanced Academics’s teachers have previously taught in traditional public schools, the company provides them with extensive and ongoing training on how to communicate with students in chat. New teachers complete a formal three-week training program, where they spend a significant amount of time learning about the intricate play between their virtual text, tone, and content, as well as some guidelines for building relationships virtually with students. At the end of the three weeks, each new teacher is paired with a mentor in that teacher’s department who is responsible for helping the new teacher to become acclimated and answering any questions. Although the mentor program is intended to last three months, it often continues much longer. Additionally, the company holds ongoing workshops and webinars throughout the year to help veteran teachers continually work at improving their online communication with students.

Unlike most schools, Advanced Academics does not assign students to specific teachers. Instead, when a student enters the chat space, she sees a list of all the

* In addition to teachers, Advanced Academics employs curriculum developers, instructional designers, multimedia designers, IT technicians, marketing professionals, student support personnel (admissions, counseling, student coaches/retention), and administrators.

teachers who are currently online for each subject. The student then chooses with which teacher she would like to work and initiates a chat with that teacher. When a teacher receives a chat from a student, he immediately greets the student and asks how her day is going. After a short personal exchange, the teacher asks the student what he can do to help her. If the student has a question about a specific lesson or assignment, then the teacher immediately opens the course on his computer screen so he can see what page the student is viewing. This also allows the teacher to direct the student to other material within the course. How the teacher chooses to respond to the student's question often varies depending on the subject. For math and science questions, the teacher typically uses a virtual whiteboard to illustrate math equations or other ideas. For English and social studies questions, the teacher typically asks a series of questions or provides various examples to help the student solve a problem or understand a particular concept better. At the end of the chat, the teacher thanks the student for chatting with him and wishes the student a nice day.

Advanced Academics's web-based learning management system contains a communication report for each student that teachers can reference to learn what kind of help a student has already received in a particular lesson or subject. Each communication report includes an automatically computer-generated log of all chats and emails and a manually-inputted record of all phone calls, which teachers are required to keep. This information enables multiple teachers within a department to provide the same student with the individual help that student needs without disrupting the student's continuity of learning.

For Advanced Academics teachers to provide students with one-on-one help for all courses in their department, the company employs a team-based approach to teaching, where teachers work together as a department to solve curricular problems, rather than relying solely on their own experience and expertise in a particular subject. To facilitate team-based teaching, Advanced Academics has all of its teachers work from cubicles in the same room. The cubicles are arranged in clusters by department, with all the math teachers sitting together, all the English teachers sitting together, and so on. This seating arrangement enables teachers to solicit help from other teachers in their same department when they are feeling overloaded with too many chats or do not know the answer to a particular student's question. It also fosters collaboration among teachers who gather informally around the cubicles on a daily basis to discuss issues pertaining to individual students, assessments, or lessons. These impromptu gatherings allow teachers to solve problems as they occur,

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rather than trying to schedule a formal meeting to discuss the issue at a later date as often occurs in traditional schools.

Although Advanced Academics teachers provide students with one-on-one help for all courses in their department, each teacher is assigned one or two courses for which that teacher is the “teacher of record.” As the teacher of record, he or she is responsible for grading all essays and written assignments, monitoring student progress, and assigning students a final grade for that course. This process ensures that all students are monitored and accounted for in every course while simultaneously allowing students to choose their teachers.

Advanced Academics’s practice of not assigning students to specific teachers enables the company to offer students around the clock access to teachers. Students have continuous access to a teacher from 9 p.m. CST on Sunday to 8 p.m. CST on Friday all year long. This service allows students to receive help with their coursework whenever it is convenient for them—day or night—rather than during specified hours. To offer this service, Advanced Academics staggers the teachers’ nine-hour shifts so that the most teachers are online during peak hours (2 p.m. to 7 p.m.) and the fewest in the middle of the night. The shifts vary by department, but there are generally about three to four teachers online at any given time for each subject—with the exception being the night shift (9 p.m. to 6 a.m.), which requires only one teacher for each of the core subjects. To ensure enough teachers are available in the evening when student demand is high, teachers work a split shift one day a week, where they work a half-day in the morning from the warehouse and a half-day in the evening from home. This way teachers can help cover the evening shift without being away from their families.

Whereas teachers in traditional schools typically spend less than 20 percent of their time helping students individually,* Advanced Academics teachers spend the majority of their time working one-on-one with students via chat, email, and phone, as previously discussed. Because Advanced Academics teachers spend their time engaging one-on-one with students, they are able to witness student progress and feel the satisfaction of student achievement. Additionally, with no bells or lesson plans to limit how much time a teacher can spend working with any one student

* In *Disrupting Class*, Clayton M. Christensen, Michael B. Horn, Curtis W. Johnson estimate that at least 80 percent of the typical teacher’s time is currently spent in monolithic activity—preparing to teach, actually teaching, and testing an entire class. Far less than 20 percent is available to help students individually.

in chat, Advanced Academics allows teachers to work individually with students for as long as the students need or desire it (Advanced Academics trains teachers to carry on chats with up to four different students at a time on a variety of topics and lessons within their department). In rare situations, students have worked with particular teachers in chat for up to four hours at a time going over every problem and assignment in a course to review for a final exam. In a traditional school, this kind of attention from teachers would not be possible.

Recognizing that every student has a different learning preference—and that every teacher has a different style of teaching—Advanced Academics encourages students to try working with a variety of teachers until they find one who speaks to them in a “language” they understand. For example, if a student does not understand a particular lesson or assignment after chatting with one teacher, then that student has the option of asking a different teacher for help. This system allows students to find the teachers who cater best to their individual learning needs. Although one might expect certain teachers to receive more student inquiries than others, Advanced Academics reports that student inquiries are distributed fairly evenly among teachers. This /// is most likely a reflection on the company’s extensive and ongoing training for teachers to become effective online communicators.

The majority of Advanced Academics’s students do not receive a lot of education support outside of school so the company encourages teachers to build strong personal relationships with their students. It is not uncommon for Advanced Academics’s students to become attached to certain teachers and seek help from those teachers on a regular basis. Some students watch for a specific teacher’s name to appear on the list of teachers who are online, and as soon as that teacher logs in, they initiate a chat with him or her. Others pop in to chat with the same teacher at the same time every day, just like clockwork. And still others return after having completed a course to update a teacher on their personal accomplishments, such as how their softball team is doing. This system gives students opportunities to interact regularly on a one-on-one basis with adults who care about their success.

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About Innosight Institute

Innosight Institute, founded in May 2007, is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit think tank whose mission is to apply Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen's theories of disruptive innovation to develop and promote solutions to the most vexing problems in the social sector.

About the author



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