

A diverse group of GHS students achieve success and college credit tackling more challenging coursework

Gainesville High School teacher Nicole A. Harris and her students start each class period with a chant:

“I was created with the ability to learn and succeed, no matter where I come from or what I’ve been through. I can help my neighbor and soar to new heights. Each day is a new beginning. I believe I can learn, I can learn, I will learn.”

That’s the philosophy that drives both Harris and the students in her Cambridge writing class. Cambridge is the academic magnet program at GHS, and students who complete Cambridge courses and pass the international exams earn college credits.



What’s different about this particular course is that the students are not actually in the Cambridge program.

Early in the 2017-18 school year, GHS principal David Shelnutt approached Harris with an idea—eliminate her standard senior English Honors class and replace it with the Cambridge-level AICE General Paper course. It would mean a more rigorous curriculum and a lot more writing, but the students would be better prepared for college-level work.

Despite some initial trepidation, Harris learned everything she could about teaching the course and developing the lessons. Then it was a matter of convincing her students to take on the challenge.

“There were some days when we really had to boost the morale in here, and students would say they wanted to switch out of the class because it was too much work,” she said. “I would sit down with them and convince them that it would ultimately benefit them.”

That certainly turned out to be the case. Results released in August by Cambridge International Assessment Education, which administers the Cambridge exams, showed that 77% of Harris’ students who took the exam in the spring passed and qualified for college credit. Those 67 students included 26 African American students, 22 white students and 19 students from other racial groups, including Hispanic and multi-racial students.

One of those students was Taylor Cobbler, who is now a freshman at Florida State University. She says the course has helped her with her college classes.

“I was really pushed past the limits I created for myself,” said Cobbler of the Cambridge writing class. “I thought what I wrote and how I wrote was fine, but the AICE course taught me that there is always room for improvement and to keep pushing.”

“I’ve had other kids say ‘I know I complained a lot, but this really helped me,’” said Harris. “They tell me that their first college class went really well and that they benefited from using the habits they developed in this class.”

Harris' current students say they recognize the benefits of taking the tougher class.

"It was definitely more than I was doing before, but I feel like it's going to be rewarding in the end by helping me prepare for college," said senior Ke'niya Williams.

"I feel like I'm capable, I just have to apply myself," said classmate Tyren Ross. "If you think you can do the work but you're lazy, you should take it because you should push yourself."

This year the number of GHS students who decided to push themselves in the Cambridge writing course is up to 116 students. That includes 82 students of color, 43 of whom are African-American.

Harris says the student diversity is very valuable in a course where there is a lot of intense discussion and writing about current issues and events.

"They all have different backgrounds, different experiences, different socio-economic levels," she said. "That diversity brings to the class a different perspective that we need to shape global citizens."

"I think it opens a lot of students' minds to the culture of the outside world, and that prepares us more for college and the rest of the world," said senior Alexander Eury.

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