

Online High School



No building, no playing fields,
no school mascot,
but students of OUHS find plenty
of academic choices to speed them
toward a diploma and beyond.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN
PHOTO PROVIDED

When it's time for Kaitlyn Melton to hit the books, she simply pulls out her iPhone, logs on to the Internet and gets to work. Any time is school time for this University of Oklahoma High School student, and, she says, that is the ideal situation for her. Although she lives in Edmond, Melton spends the better part of her school year in California, pursuing her dream of becoming an actress.

"Whenever I have a few minutes here and there between auditions and acting class, I can get my work done," the 15-year-old sophomore says. "OU High is wonderful. It is so flexible, and it meets all my needs."

Melton's story echoes those of her fellow OUHS classmates. Students find their way to this nontraditional school setting for a variety of reasons, says Sally Jo Blair, OU High counselor. Some are aspiring professionals, like Melton. Perhaps illness has caused them to fall behind. Others want to be challenged. Regardless of the reasons, anytime, anywhere education is the appeal for the nearly 1,000 students taking classes through OU High School.

"Our school is not in competition with public schools," Blair says. "Rather, we complement what already exists. One of our largest constituent groups is rural students supplementing their own high school's curriculum."

As one of only eight universities in the country with a diploma-granting high school imbedded on its campus, OU serves approximately 150 students enrolled in its diploma program. This year, 28 students

graduated with an OU High School diploma. Another 750 students are currently enrolled in 1,700 courses that are available in both online and paper formats.

If one went looking, the actual school might be hard to find, at least in the physical sense. There is no marquee in front announcing back-to-school night or weird

of University Outreach.

Behind the scenes, however, is a complete operational structure that keeps the school running. A curriculum department is responsible for the design and content of courses. IT puts the courses online and trouble shoots technical issues. Customer Service handles all enrollments, lessons, tests, advanced placement testing and proctors local students. The bookstore supplies necessary materials, and the financial department handles tuition and fees.

"We all work well as a collective system with the mutual intention to hold students accountable and help them be successful," Blair says.

The high school is a self-supporting part of the Center for Independent and Distance Learning and is accredited by the North Central Association on Accreditation and School Improvement, and by the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation. While OU High has been accredited since 2001, distance education has been part of the University's mission since 1913.

Originally, students not living near campus gained access to education by sending and receiving assignments and tests through the mail, but this method had its limits. With the evolution of radio, television and satellite programs, the reach of distance education was extended, and now the Internet has completely rev-



Sara Elizabeth Bojarski of Norman, an OU High graduate with plans to attend culinary school to become a pastry chef, is congratulated by her father following commencement ceremonies for the Class of 2007.

hair day. Nor are there other manifestations of a traditional brick and mortar school, like Friday night football games, drama club or detention. In fact, there is no OUHS sign at all in front of the Cross Main Building on Jenkins Avenue where the school is housed inside the Center for Independent and Distance Learning, part

PAGE 25: Members of the OU High School Class of 2007 pose for their commencement photograph following the ceremony in the University's Meacham Auditorium.



OU High School graduates, from left, Lauren Degar, Thorin Wagoner and Jacquelyn Balko listen to the commencement address given by former State Senator Cal Hobson.

olutionized delivery methods.

As a licensed school counselor and certified life coach, Blair works with students in a variety of ways. She keeps up with student records and credits to ensure that students are on track to graduate. Blair also helps with the age-old question of what to do in life as a grownup.

She is quick to dispel the perception that OU High is a school of last resort. "This is hardly the case, although we do have those students who have not been successful in the traditional high school setting," Blair says. "Our students are here because OUHS supports them getting where they want to go. Collectively, the graduating class this year earned \$391,000 in college scholarships."

A plus for many students is the dual credit option. College courses available through the Center for Independent and Distance Learning can be taken for both high school and college credits.

Tara Nelson entered OU immediately after graduating from OUHS in 2007 with 22 college credit hours and an Army ROTC scholarship.

After attending a private Jewish high

school in Florida, Nelson moved to Norman and found she did not care for the public school choices available. So, she finished her senior year of high school at OU.

"I really liked the online option," she says. "I was able to finish high school and get the freshman college stuff out of the way."

While the subjects are the same as in a regular high school, OUHS coursework is self-paced, giving students nine months to complete each class. This arrangement enables advanced students, like Alex Stanton, to work at an accelerated rate. The ambitious 14-year-old is the youngest ever to graduate from OU High School. She is enrolled as a freshman at a community college near her Tucson, Arizona, home and hopes to work in the medical field one day.

"I looked at universities to find a high school, and Oklahoma had the best one," she says. "The staff at OU was really helpful and responsive."


Stanton focused her studies around a paper-based curriculum but nearly all the high school's materials can be accessed online, with assignments submitted by e-mail or fax. Teachers are certified state

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high school teachers and are readily available to their students via e-mail. The responsibility to stay current and complete assignments rests with students.

For Dax Thomas of Stillwater, that took some getting used to. "Rather than a teacher telling me to get things done, I had to take that responsibility on myself," he says. "But the staff at OU really works with you to set deadline goals and to meet them."

As a member of the class of 2007, Thomas says his experience working independently has prepared him for life as a college student. He has earned a scholarship to Northern Oklahoma College where he plans to study digital media and photography.

While technology has transformed the way OUHS operates, the school remains first and foremost all about education. Whether by mail or computer, OU High School helps individual students attain one valuable piece of hard copy – their high school diploma. 

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