

Middle College



So what IS middle college?

A middle college programme is a type of alternative high school that allows students to earn both high school and college credits concurrently. It's essentially a bridge to college, where students complete their high school requirements while simultaneously taking college courses and earning credits that can be applied towards a college degree. These programmes are often located on community college campuses and are designed to support students while stimulating their academic development and their quest for learning. In West Valley Middle College programme, the two required high school classes are not honours or AP, but are taught like college courses. For all other classes, a semester of a college course is equal to a year of that same class at a regular high school.

To find out more, I spoke with West Valley Middle College Professor, Josh Hancock, as well as Cosmo Cooper, graduating from the middle college programme/Saratoga High School this June.

Josh Hancock - an educator's perspective

Q: Why do students choose the middle college path vs doing junior and senior year at high school?

A: Students choose middle college because it offers a mature, college-like environment where they can grow academically and personally. They gain access to a wide range of college-level courses, earn real college credit, and develop skills in writing, public speaking, and critical thinking. Many students are ready for more independence and academic challenge than a traditional high school can provide, and middle college meets that need in a supportive and structured way.

Q: What makes a student a good fit for your programme? What should a student consider before applying?

A: A good fit is a student who is motivated, curious, and ready for a more independent learning environment. Strong time management and a willingness to engage deeply with ideas are important. Before applying, students should consider whether they're ready to handle college-level coursework and manage a more flexible schedule. They should also reflect on their readiness to grow, both academically and personally, in a setting that expects responsibility and maturity. Finally, they should be prepared to write in all of their classes, often during class under timed conditions.

Q: Why do you continue to teach middle college vs high school?

A: After over 20 years, I continue teaching middle college because of the students - it's a joy to work with young people who are eager to learn and grow. The environment is positive, respectful, and intellectually stimulating. Compared to an archetypal high school, middle college allows for greater depth in teaching and more meaningful engagement. I see students transform - not just as writers and speakers, but as confident, thoughtful people. It's deeply rewarding to be a part of the middle college programme at West Valley College.

Q: What would you say to parents who are nervous about how middle college may affect their student's college applications?

A: In our experience, middle college enhances college applications. Students leave with real college credit, strong academic skills, and a track record of success in a college environment. Admissions officers recognise the rigour of the programme and the maturity it requires. With dedicated counsellors — Erin Reyes, Mary Carol Bernal, and Chris Jones — and an experienced teaching team — Josh Hancock and Emily Cassie — students are well-supported throughout. Parents can feel confident that middle college prepares students not only for college acceptance, but also for college success.



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Cosmo Cooper - a student's perspective

Q: How did you hear about middle college?

A: My mum had heard about it from members of Saratoga Rotary and she looked into the topic because she thought it might be a good fit for me.

Q: Why did you decide to take a look at middle college?

A: A big selling point for me was that I still had 3 semesters of PE left to do and I wasn't really drawn to PE or sports. Middle college offered different choices to fulfil that requirement, such as volleyball, dance, or yoga, which resonated more with me. There were also some classes at the high school where I didn't feel the structure was fully effective for my continued learning growth. A third selling point was the breadth and depth of classes available in my core interest - drama - which meant I could focus on several very specific topics vs a broader, more general curriculum.

Q: How many years were you at middle college?

A: I did my junior and senior years at middle college. The programme is only for these two years; you can't go any earlier in high school. I had to take two classes to fulfil the high school graduation requirements - History (US History for junior year and Gov & Econ for senior year) and English both years - with the same teachers for each subject in both years. Other than that, I could take any classes I wanted that would fit into my schedule.

Q: What advantages do you feel you have had with attending West Valley Middle College?

A: A major advantage was being able to create my own class schedule; most of us only have classes from Monday to Thursday, although you can take classes on Saturdays, asynchronous classes, or any other time that fits your schedule. You can also decide when you want to come in, so if you are morning person, you can get in at 7.45 am or 9.20 am for class. Or, if you work better later, you can come in at 12.30 pm and take more afternoon classes. Having a flexible schedule meant I was able to do work in the break prior to my psychology class, so I had the time to be fully prepped and ready for it.

Another advantage is getting to work with college students who mostly took their classes because they wanted to and were interested in the subject for its own sake, not just fulfilling an elective. For instance, in drama class, I worked with people who were passionate and inspired by theatre, which helped fuel and grow my passion.

A less obvious advantage is that some classes contained older students, which is definitely a different dynamic. It really taught me how to communicate better by having to talk with people who don't necessarily experience things the same way my friends and I do; they aren't on the internet as much, for instance. I now have both friends and peers in older age groups. One of them is maybe mid-60's and a very different generation, but my friends and I just went to see his rock band in concert, which was a lot of fun.

There are a lot of social/extra-curricular benefits as well. You can participate in West Valley extra-curricular happenings as well as high school ones, so I was able to participate in "Almost Maine" at SHS in junior year and then "Electra" at West Valley in the second semester of the same year.



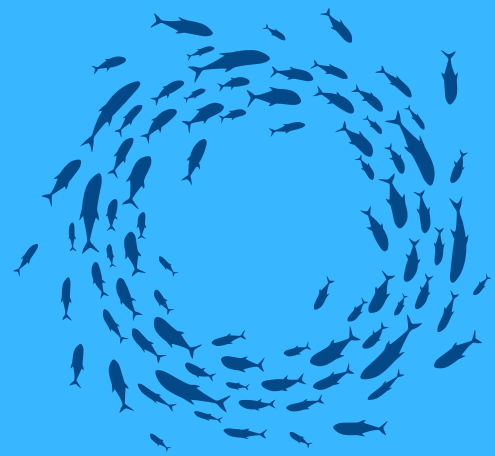
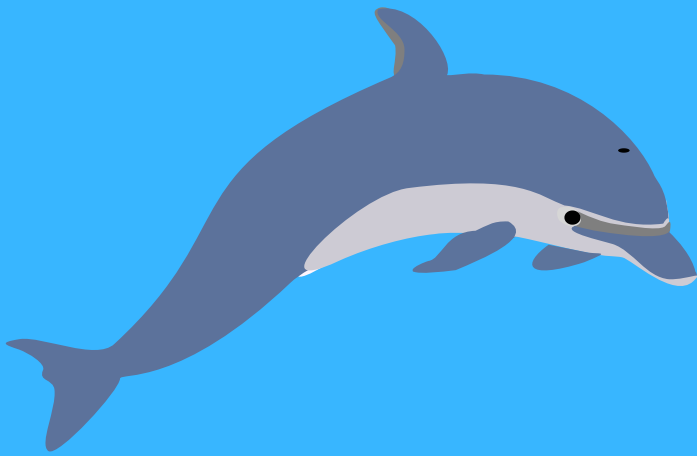
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Q: What are the major disadvantages, if any?

A: There are a few. Firstly, since all classes are on West Valley's campus, you have to make a big effort to connect with your friends back at high school. It takes away the high school structure where you and all your high school friends are corralled in same area. Most middle college students that I know have lost a lot of friends. It feels like you are out of sight and therefore out of mind; it is so much easier to make plans in person. Even if you make an effort, you are somewhat out of the main loop for high school.

Another point is the lack of high school structure, which can be an advantage or disadvantage, depending upon the student. You are left to your own devices and there is no one to remind you of assignments regularly. At middle college, you have to keep track on your own. If you are really good at self-sufficiency, then middle college is good for you. If you need a high school structure with regular reminders and chasing for outstanding work, middle college is definitely not for you.



Q: Do you have assigned counsellors, as with high school?

A: Yes, in fact, I have assigned counsellors from both SHS and West Valley; my middle college counsellor, Mary Carol Bernal, has checked in on me the most. There is definitely a strong support system in place for students, and I was helped by counsellors in both places when dealing with my college applications.

Q: Do you feel being at middle college helped with your college applications?

A: Yes, I think so. middle college gave me so many opportunities to take a bunch of different classes and explore additional topics for free, which really expanded my realm of knowledge. When I applied to college and was interviewing at Manchester University, although I was applying for a theatre major, they asked me about the sociology class I had taken. Also, working with college level people and professors is very impressive on a resume or application. It shows you are ready for college and are already acclimated to the self-structured approach, showing a level of maturity a lot of high schoolers don't have.

Q: Would you recommend middle college to everyone?

A: No, you have to be self-motivated and be honest with yourself. I had a friend who was there in my junior year, but returned to high school for his senior year, as he realised he really needed high school's structure. But, if you are self-driven and organised, middle college is a great opportunity for a deeper learning experience.

