Hanna Brown, a student at Paul Bryant High School in Tuscaloosa, dreams of becoming a veterinarian, but her hopes were clouded when she made a C in her ninth-grade biology class. “That was horrible,” she recalls.

When she heard a free prep class was being offered at The University of Alabama the summer before she was to begin Advanced Placement biology, Brown jumped at the chance to improve her understanding — even though she anticipated a dull experience. “I kind of thought it would be sitting down and doing a lot of paperwork,” she recalls. “But we were actually doing labs all the time, which is really fun. It wasn’t what I expected at all, but it was a good surprise.”

Brown, now an 11th grader, says her favorite lab involved enzymes. “I remember learning about enzymes in school, but I never understood,” she says. “Doing the lab and hearing people explain it made enzymes click for me. I enjoyed all the lessons, but that one made me think I could be good at biology.”

Brown adds that being able to ask as many questions as she wanted and learning test-taking strategies left her feeling well prepared for her fall class.

In 2014, Brown and 245 other high school students were part of CollegeFirst, a nationally unique UA service-learning initiative designed to prepare high schoolers — particularly those from underserved schools — for college-level Advanced Placement courses in math, English and science. Forty-seven University of Alabama students in Tuscaloosa, Birmingham and Huntsville led the high schoolers through three weeks of demanding academic curriculum.

Advanced Placement courses enable high school students to take college-level courses taught by teachers in their high schools. Students who pass AP exams receive college credit and are three times more likely to earn a college degree than those who do not pass, according to the College Board.

UA students, who enroll in UH 300/NEW 310 CollegeFirst, spend an initial week during Summer Term I learning how to be tutors and studying issues related to educa-
Biology students examine a slide.

“I kind of thought it would be sitting down and doing a lot of paperwork. But we were actually doing labs all the time, which is really fun.”
—RHIANNA BROWN, PAUL BRYANT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT AND COLLEGEFIRST BIOLOGY MENTEE

After playing a game in which students had to answer a question correctly to earn a point and gain access to the next question, a high school student asked for a list of the questions. “I asked why she would want these problems, and she blind-sided me by responding, ‘I want to practice them at home.’”

“My outlook on the next generation has changed. There’s so much talk in our society that the next generation of students is too apathetic to their studies. What usually is not reported is information about students who are given the opportunity to soar and exceed expectations by a thousand fold.”

Another education major, Maggie Sisco, says CollegeFirst taught her everything covered in college and work for the FBI, says CollegeFirst gave her much-needed practice in teaching new concepts. “Perhaps the most valuable thing it has helped me learn is how to read my students and adjust my lesson plan,” says Sisco, a junior majoring in elementary education. “Any good teacher must be flexible and must be able to determine what is, or isn’t, helping her students. A teacher must be continuously assessing the students’ comprehension and focus.”

Students with other career plans say being part of CollegeFirst will help them as well. Mitchell, who hopes to work in corporate logistics and operations, says he learned problems are best approached from multiple directions and what makes sense to one person might not to the next. “The experience I gained in this program will be useful when working to solve problems, research new subjects or explain anything to anyone — in a meeting, over lunch or in an interview,” he says.

“Perhaps the most valuable thing it has helped me learn is how to read my students and adjust my lesson plan,” says Sisco, a junior majoring in elementary education. “Any good teacher must be flexible and must be able to determine what is, or isn’t, helping her students. A teacher must be continuously assessing the students’ comprehension and focus.”

College-level experiences, says Stephen Black, director of the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility. “This initiative recruits successful college students to serve as both tutors and mentors, helping increase the number of high school students who will be ready not only to attend college, but to excel in college,” Black says.

Being able to learn from those who close to his own age was a benefit, says Nathan Rogers, a 12th grader at Kate Duncan Smith DAR High School in Grant, Ala. “The college mentors know how to make it fun and entertaining,” says Smith, a biology student. “They also know how to put it into terms that we actually understand.”

“Here’s so much talk in our society that the next generation of students is too apathetic to their studies. What usually is not reported is information about students who are given the opportunity to soar and exceed expectations by a thousand fold.”
—PATRICK MITCHELL, COLLEGEFIRST CHEMISTRY MENTOR AND UA JUNIOR MAJORING IN OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

To learn more about CollegeFirst, visit cesr.ua.edu or contact CESR at cesr@ua.edu or 205-348-6490.