

Why AC's Middle School Electives Are the Secret Sauce of Strong Academic Culture

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Middle school is a time of exploration, discovery, and some interesting outfit choices. For our faculty, the Middle School age marks a perfect alignment unique to this age group: emerging independence, the need for acceptance and to be heard, and the questioning of absolutely everything. It's the perfect time to introduce students to a learning experience that is big on choice, rooted in curiosity, and personalized to meet a wide range of interests. That's where Allendale Columbia's Middle School electives come to life for students through their own agency.

Unlike traditional programs that take a one-size-fits-all approach, AC's academic model empowers students to chart their own course. The elective program isn't just a menu of options—it's a launchpad for future passions, careers, and "I didn't know I'd enjoy this!" moments. Over the course of their 3 years at AC, a student will take 14 electives from over 25 different course offerings.

So what's on the schedule?

For the business-minded, *Entrepreneurship* offers a crash course in marketing, financial literacy, and product design. Students explore what it takes to be a successful business owner from a faculty member who has been a former business owner—and occasionally try to sell their ideas back to the faculty (with excellent pitch decks, we might add).

Those who love tinkering, programming, and a good challenge can dive into *EV3 LEGO Robotics for Competition*, where teams build and code autonomous robots to tackle missions in the First LEGO League. It's part science, part strategy, and entirely fun, sometimes frustrating, and always addictive. For the tech-savvy, *Computer Science Discoveries* dives into the world of app development, physical computing, and real-world problem-solving.

Science lovers have plenty to get excited about, especially in *Forensics*. Think crime scene investigation meets biology, chemistry, and problem-solving. Students study fingerprints, fiber analysis, and even mock blood spatter patterns—CSI meets STEM. And for hands-on, outdoor exploration, *AC Science* lets students engage with the campus ecosystem—producing maple syrup, analyzing creek water, and getting very muddy in the name of discovery.

There's no shortage of creative opportunities, either. *Mixed Media* takes a fresh spin on traditional art materials, encouraging projects that combine watercolor with collage, charcoal, or even wire. In *Ceramics*, students explore the expressive side of clay, sculpting original vessels, sculptures, and tableware with both form and function in mind. For students who love storytelling, *Newspaper* and *Photojournalism* provide the perfect platforms to share campus happenings through written word and lens. And for those with a flair for the dramatic (or cinematic), *The Roles of Music in Film* explores how soundtracks shape storytelling, culminating in an original film score.

Performing arts get their spotlight in *Vocal Collective* and *How It's Made: Theatre Edition*. In the latter, students work on both a dinner theatre production and the Kindergarten Musical—gaining experience on stage, backstage, and everywhere in between.

Students who want to take full ownership of their learning can choose *Mini-BIRCHES*, a guided independent study where they work with a faculty mentor to design a personalized project. Past ideas have ranged from designing a video game, stock market pitches, a documentary on our beloved 7th grade Pathfinder trip, and a deep dive into civics education in schools. Because of the flexibility and collaboration within our own walls, one student spent the entire year during their elective mentoring and shadowing in the Kindergarten classroom, learning from our experts in the building and pursuing the passion for education and neurodiversity.

For students ready to make their voices heard, the *Middle School Newspaper* offers a chance to inform, entertain, and occasionally stir the pot—in the most responsible and middle school appropriate journalistic way, of course. From feature stories and interviews to comics and hot takes on school lunch, this elective gives students the tools to become confident communicators and contributors to campus life. Meanwhile, *No Place for Hate* puts empathy into action. As part of a nationally recognized initiative, students collaborate across divisions to lead projects that promote inclusivity and kindness. It's part advocacy, part leadership, and 100% essential in today's world. Together, these courses give students not just a platform—but a purpose. AC is proud to be a "No Place for Hate" School for the 4th year in a row.

Why does it all matter?

Because students who have choice and agency in their learning are more engaged, more confident, and more invested in what's next. Whether pursuing art, engineering, music, activism, or entrepreneurship, middle schoolers at AC aren't just learning content—they're learning how to learn, lead, and grow. Our electives reflect a core belief of our middle school faculty: that school should be as dynamic, diverse, and full of possibility as the students themselves.

At Allendale Columbia, academic excellence doesn't mean doing more of the same—it means offering more that's meaningful and impactful. As we like to say here at AC: Middle School doesn't happen to them, it happens with them. That's why our middle schoolers aren't just checking boxes. They're building paths. And occasionally... bottling syrup.