

C-U Scholars program aims to prepare more students for life after high school

By *Jodi Heckel*

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Say you're a high school student in Illinois and you've met the state's graduation requirements.

Doing that much, and no more, is not going to get you into most of the state's four-year universities. It might not get you a well-paying technical job either.

Both the Champaign and Urbana school districts have higher graduation requirements than the state minimum.

And educators hope a new program, called C-U Scholars, will encourage more students to take higher-level courses and help them understand the skills they need for college and the workplace.

The C-U Scholars Program is to be a signature project of the [Champaign-Urbana Schools Foundation](#) [1]. It is a collaboration of the school districts, the University of Illinois, Parkland College, and the business community.

"We see this as a community effort," said Gail Rost, executive director of the C-U Schools Foundation. "It will be pushed along by the foundation. But it's not a project we can do alone. The community has to support it for it to succeed."

The foundation has been working with the school districts and other entities for the past year to develop the program. It's based on a federally funded program, the State Scholars Initiative, now defunct, that existed in 24 states. (Illinois was not one of them.) The initiative created business-education partnerships and used business volunteers to talk with students about the skills needed in the workplace.

The C-U Scholars program will recruit local business leaders to talk to students about the classes and skills they will need to be prepared for a job.

To become a C-U Scholar, students must meet academic requirements, fulfill a community service requirement, participate in physical fitness activities, maintain a certain attendance record, and complete summer activities that include enrichment classes, career planning, and internship programs.

The program will also be a clearinghouse for academic, career, enrichment, and volunteer opportunities that already exist in the school districts and at the UI and Parkland. They include the dual credit courses available at Parkland; summer enrichment classes at the UI; park district

offerings; and the Education to Careers and Professions program in the Champaign school district and the Executive Internship program in the Urbana school district, both of which provide opportunities for internships for high school students.

Rost hopes the program will eventually include scholarships for seniors who complete all the requirements and graduate as C-U Scholars.

After Brian Holding, chief executive officer for Human Kinetics [2], heard about the program at a presentation in early May, he told Rost he wanted to be involved.

"I want the schools to be strong and have students coming out of them to have great opportunities," Holding said. "I think anything that can be done to encourage students to take a stronger courseload is very worthwhile."

Holding said he'd like to talk with students about the skills they need to get a good job. He noted the labor market is more competitive than ever. In 2009, Human Kinetics had 1,655 job applications. The company hired 22 people.

"Clearly, the better prepared you are, both in terms of education as well as a track record of successful experience, you're going to be better positioned to get a job," Holding said.

That means not just taking a strong core curriculum, but also understanding the necessary personal skills. The kind of experience employers are looking for includes a record of growing within a position, having a positive impact on the workplace, and taking on additional responsibilities, Holding said. "It's not just that you worked somewhere. There's a big difference there," he said.

Sean McLaughlin, who coordinates the Education for Employment program through the Regional Office of Education [3], agrees.

"What I hear is lacking the most is soft skills: the ability to get along in the workplace, to function as a team member, to be dependable," he said.

McLaughlin said the program has great potential.

"If we can introduce (career planning) and reinforce it every year with some ideas, we can help young people get some direction. That's more important than it's ever been before," he said.

"I don't think that as educators we do a good enough job helping young people understand their options," he added.

The C-U Scholars Program is open to every high school student, Rost said, and she hopes most of them will choose to join it.

"Every kid has the potential to participate, from the struggling learner to the gifted student," Rost said.

Many Champaign and Urbana graduates already meet the academic requirements of C-U Scholars. Some educators say they want to encourage students in the middle, who aren't taking

upper-level courses or taking advantage of programs offered in the schools, to participate.

"We certainly want to target the students who have the potential to do this, but have not seen the value," said Champaign Assistant Superintendent Beth Shepperd. "Even the top students (who already meet the academic standards), we feel the community service component and some of the other things will help produce a well-rounded and community-involved graduate."

Marc Changnon runs the Education to Careers and Professions ^[4] program for the Champaign school district. He hopes C-U Scholars will teach students that, with a solid education and community service and internship experience, "there will be great things down the road."

"What we hope to do, and I think it all comes down to the marketing, is make sure all our students are made aware of it and the rewards they will gain from doing something like this," Changnon said. "If we can teach them the work ethic, the things that will get you places, that's one of the beauties of C-U Scholars. Reach out to things you don't think are possible and see what happens."

McLaughlin believes helping students develop skills in the areas in which they are interested, and integrating the academic courses they need, will help them be more engaged with school.

"We have a number of young people we haven't helped with decision-making and helping them understand their options, and in some cases, they're not engaged with their education. We can't afford that," McLaughlin said.

"For students who are not engaged, the reason they are not engaged is they don't understand what is in it for them," he said. Once they do, "Then education becomes about them, reaching their goals."

He and Shepperd noted many technical jobs require more academic skills than students realize. Auto mechanics need the reading ability to interpret computer manuals, and welders need geometry.

"Our top graduates are prepared for the finest universities in the world," Shepperd said. "However, some students choose to remain in Champaign, to go to the workforce, to seek a trade, and these students need to be equally well-prepared. We'd like to see more of our students take advantage of some highly-paid technical and trade positions, but if they don't have good strong skills – analytical skills, reading, writing, math – they won't be able to get apprentice positions."

Many of those jobs also require education beyond high school, said Kris Young ^[5], vice president for academic services at Parkland. C-U Scholars can "help (students) understand they have to stay engaged with math and English to get in the diesel tech or nursing programs," she said.

Many students see they need three years of math to graduate and opt not to take any math their senior year.

"That's where a big gap comes in," Young said. By the time they get to Parkland, "They've lost so much ground and they end up needing remedial coursework, and it takes that much longer for students to get into their curriculum."

About 70 percent of students coming straight to Parkland from high school need to take "developmental" math before going on the a college-level math course, Young said. The figures

for English are 35 percent to 40 percent, and about 30 percent for reading.

Young says the C-U Scholar Program will benefit faculty at Parkland and at the local middle and high schools by helping each understand what the expectations of each are in their classrooms.

The timeline for the program is to talk with eighth-graders next January and get them to enroll in the program for their upcoming freshman year.

The next step is establishing a permanent committee that will develop a business plan, create a coordinator position that will be a liaison between the schools and the community, and begin fundraising.

The estimated cost for the program is \$500,000 over five years, and Rost hopes to have pledges of financial support in place by January.

"People need know it's an investment going right back out into the community," Rost said. "And we think the community is going to be better for it."

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Links:

[1] <http://cuschoolsfoundation.org/index.php>

[2] <http://www.humankinetics.com/>

[3] <http://www.roe9.k12.il.us/>

[4] <http://www.champaignschools.org/index2.php?header=.&file=eep/index>

[5] <http://www.parkland.edu/spotlightDetails.aspx?Channel=/Channels/Admissions and Campus Wide&WorkflowItemID=c3faa36d-6b0b-4e7d-8e84-033f2efd7822>

C-U Scholars program requirements

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Requirements for the C-U Scholars Program:

– Academic courses:

Four years of English; three years of math; three years of laboratory science; three years of social science; two years of a language other than English.

– Physical fitness:

For two out of four years, students must participate on a sports team, in physical education classes, or in a community activity representative of a healthy lifestyle.

– Community service:

For two out of four years, students must participate in an extracurricular club or community activity that may include part-time employment or volunteer work.

– Attendance:

The original proposal called for a requirement of 90 percent attendance in school, but based on feedback that this wasn't a stringent enough requirement, it will likely be increase to 95 percent or 98 percent attendance, said Gail Rost, executive director of the Champaign-Urbana Schools Foundation.

– Summer activities:

Students must participate in a summer activity after each high school year. They include career visits; summer enrichment, camp or community programs; and internships or apprenticeship introductions, college planning or Parkland College dual credit courses.

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