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Students get good start with dual credit

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URBANA — Melissa Duong just graduated from Centennial High School and is a sophomore at the University of Illinois.

Freshman year? Who needs the time and expense, when you already speak Vietnamese and some Spanish, and you're moving on to a career in international business?

Starting the summer before her junior year, Duong acquired 40 hours of UI credit through a combination of classes at Parkland College and her own high school.

That's more than a year of classes, at about \$33,000 a year for UI business majors, saved.

At 18, she's a pioneer in dual-credit courses.

"I'm a little bit late to take full advantage," she says.

That's because the university only this spring significantly revised its dual credit transfer rules, allowing eligible high school juniors and seniors, ages 16 or over, to take community college courses to earn credit simultaneously toward both a high school diploma and a college degree — even courses taught at a high school by a high school teacher.

Rich Blazier, a retired Parkland department head who is a leader in the dual credit effort there, said students can fulfill high school graduation requirements while earning college credits at Parkland, online, and even at their own high school.

Duong took most of her classes during evenings at Parkland.

"I wasn't into sports, and I like school," she says.

Parkland credits were much less expensive than those at the UI, so she said she saved herself and her parents money — but that wasn't her main reason for knocking herself out taking the evening classes while at Centennial.

"They offered real college experience," Duong said. "You can take AP classes, but there's no guarantee you'll pass the test. I didn't even take an AP test, and I have all this credit."

She's also the first in her extended family, much of which is still in Vietnam, to go to college.

Blazier said the UI has always been open to dual credit classes, but restricted those classes used as core high school graduation requirement.

"(The UI is) one of just a few schools in Illinois that had that requirement. Now it makes it quite a bit easier for dual credit courses to transfer to the UI," he said.

Stacey Kostell, the UI's director of undergraduate admissions, said a UI Senate educational policy committee recommendation created the change.

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"The policy went into effect with this (fall) enrollment class," she said.

"It's positive all the way around, for the students and for us. We're in a fortunate situation, with good retention and graduation rates to appeal to those dual credit students."

Blazier said dual credit enrollment at Parkland is expanding, with 29 high schools and close to 800 students participating.

"Almost all the schools in our district send us at least one student. The growth is just exploding," he said.

That doesn't mean they're all paying Parkland tuition, though.

"About 78 percent of the students are taking dual credit classes at their own high school," Blazier said. "It's tuition-free for students in those classes."

Some smaller high schools have very high enrollment in dual-credit classes, including St. Joseph-Ogden and Judah Christian, Blazier said.

"LeRoy is in the Star Trek (out of this world) group with over 30 percent of their junior/senior class taking dual credit classes," Blazier said, crediting LeRoy counselor Jeff Baughman.

Baughman said he expects the program to grow at LeRoy.

"In the economic times we're in, as a way for four-year college-bound students to get ahead on gen ed requirements, our community understands the benefits," he said.

The LeRoy counselor also said that the classes are useful in giving high school students an accurate picture of collegiate life.

"The students participate and understand the value of what they're getting in college classes," Baughman said.

Blazier said LeRoy sets a standard for the sprawling community college district, with a district-wide goal of 20 percent of the junior-senior classes.

Duong said she hopes to continue her education to get a master's in business administration. She's been to Vietnam about five times, as well as Paris and London, and wants to travel all over the world in her business ventures, perhaps with a home base in the Chicago suburbs.

But in the meantime, this sophomore is looking forward to her first-day UI class.

On Quad Day, she expects to join a club or two that helps people out, and she and a high school friend will move into their private dorm a little early to help get settled into college life.