

Preparing Urban Scholars for College

A Best Practice in College Readiness

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Urban Scholars was founded at the University of Massachusetts Boston two decades ago as a pilot program with just 15 students. With support from the university, Boston Public Schools and various funders, this multicultural academic enrichment program has thrived.

Today, Urban Scholars serves more than 100 low-income, first-generation Boston students with high academic potential. Half of them speak a first language other than English. Their average household income: \$24,000.

Remarkably, 98 percent of Urban Scholars graduates have been accepted to a postsecondary institution. Eighty-six percent have either earned or are working toward bachelor's degrees; 11 percent have pursued graduate degrees.

Enriching experiences

The Urban Scholars program serves students throughout the academic year and seven weeks during the summer, offering advanced after-school classes, seminars, tutoring and supervised study. Urban Scholars staff and teachers work with students and partner high schools to develop talent and motivation of participating students. The students meet at UMass Boston's campus on Boston Harbor twice each week during the school year, and five days each week during the summer. Participating middle school students receive an annual stipend up to \$925; high school students get up to \$2,300 each year.

Enrichment classes are offered in subjects ranging from math to public speaking to SAT preparation based on students' skills, grade level and interests. During last summer's math class, for example, students collected data on the first flight of the Wright Brothers and used a wind tunnel to test objects' force and drag.

In reading and writing classes, students improve their critical thinking, writing and public speaking skills by studying and discussing social, political, economic and cultural issues relevant to them. As a final project, students develop graphic design skills by creating a newsletter of their work using Microsoft Publisher.

In addition, every Urban Scholar is expected to take at least one university-level course during the program. Last summer, six students took university courses: Ancient & Medieval Art, Chemistry Principles; Introduction to English; Philosophy 108: Moral & Social Problems and Women, Culture and Identity. After completing the summer program, three students participated in a weeklong Moakley Public Speaking Institute at the John F. Kennedy Library.

Heading off trouble

Student retention and persistence are major challenges for the Urban Scholars program. Last year, 48 percent of the previous year's Urban Scholars returned to the program—two percentage points shy of the program's goal of retaining 50 percent. UMass Boston Associate Vice Provost and program founder Joan Becker, explains that being an Urban Scholar is a huge commitment. "Some students move around; others grapple with balancing time commitments—struggling to manage their personal time, school life and program obligations. And, as Boston public schools increase academic expectations, these students have more homework," she says.

The program requires students to maintain a 3.0 or better grade point average in school and has recently initiated a comprehensive approach to student advising, including detecting and addressing academic difficulties before official warning notices are issued by the school.

The Urban Scholars' approach brings teachers, school officials, parents or guardians and program staff together in support of the student's success. The application process, for example, seeks permission from parents or guardians so that program staff can communicate with school officials and access students' grades. Each term, Urban Scholars staff meet with guidance counselors and teachers to assess student progress and discuss more subtle signs of potential trouble, such as a change in attitude, disengagement, change in body language or inability to grasp certain concepts.

"Teachers are very aware of their students' ongoing progress and any changes in behavior or performance. However, they may not have the resources to follow-up on those observations. Because of our ongoing systematic communication with teachers and officials, we are privy to those early warning signs and are able to institute a comprehensive holistic approach for student improvement," says Urban Scholars Director Robert-Thomas Duclersaint, an expert in adolescent development who speaks Haitian Creole and French.

Once a warning is sent by the schools, Urban Scholars staff work with a student's teachers to create an Academic Improvement Plan. Subject-specific, one-on-one tutoring is scheduled, and weekly progress reports assess homework quality, class work and test grades. Staff and teachers also confer with the school's administration to gather any relevant information about the student's behavior. Then Urban Scholars staff contact the parent or guardian to alert them to their child's academic difficulty and make recommendations on what they might do to support the Academic Improvement Plan.

The Urban Scholars program's goal is to mold students to assume positions of leadership and achievement in society.

This comprehensive approach has worked. One Urban Scholar, who had done well in classes, gradually became disengaged and adopted a negative attitude toward schoolwork. Staff spoke with school officials who believed the loss of the student's mother and her upcoming graduation were the cause. When Urban Scholars staff discussed the situation with her father, they learned that the young woman had stopped seeing a therapist who was helping her cope with her grief. Ultimately, the student explained that schoolwork had become much more difficult with graduation approaching and that her grief had increased with the realization that her mother would not see her get her diploma. "We discussed how difficult a time this must be for her, praised her on the wonderful job she had done, and encouraged her to meet with her therapist to help her through this difficult time," says Duclersaint. "She did just that and it helped her tremendously."

Another Urban Scholar did well one term, but began to slide the next. His teachers thought the problem was not his ability, but a lack of consistency in applying himself. The young man's mother said she constantly threatened him with losses of privileges if he did not do well in school. His teachers, his mother and Urban Scholars staff agreed on a plan of action that included five hours a week of required one-on-one tutoring. The student's status in the Urban Scholars program was designated as conditional; if he did well, he would remain an Urban Scholar in good standing. If he did poorly, he would not be allowed to participate in activities, field trip or classes. "This has proven to be the ongoing motivating factor for him," says Duclersaint. "and he now consistently does well."

Being college-ready

College advising is a major component of the Urban Scholars program. Students spend the summer prior to their senior year in a weekly college-advising seminar. In the fall, the focus shifts to selecting and applying to college. Every junior and senior meets one-on-one with the Urban Scholar college advisor, Chris Kelly, who helps them choose colleges, complete college applications, seek financial aid and, importantly, link with campus student support services to ensure a smooth transition to freshman year.

The program also operates field trips to the Boston National College Fair held each spring at Boston's Bayside Expo and Conference Center. Students are encouraged to intern in a professional field of interest. Last summer, 15 students participated in internships at a variety of workplaces, including the Boston Bar Association, Boston Police Department, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Franklin Park Zoo, Judicial Youth Corps, State Street Bank, Summer Search and Verizon.

Engaged grantmaking

In 2000, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation made a five-year commitment to the Urban Scholars program through its Minority High Achievement initiative, which aims to increase the number of New England students from underrepresented minority groups who achieve at the highest level. By making a multi-year grant commitment to the program, based on satisfactory annual progress, the foundation has encouraged the program to focus attention on program design, attracting and retaining talented staff and designing data collection and evaluation systems to assess outcomes, without the burden of annual fundraising. Foundation grants for the program, from 2000 to 2005, have totaled \$1.1 million.

The foundation adopted this multi-year approach to grantmaking because we believe a long-term investment in our grantee partners is the best strategy for high-impact in education. Says Joan Becker: "The multiyear funding has provided us with stability, especially in light of the cuts in education funding in recent years. Without it, we would have died; it helped me make the argument to the university to keep us."

The Urban Scholars program's goal is to mold students to assume positions of leadership and achievement in society. Urban Scholars have earned graduate degrees in urban planning from MIT, psychology from Boston College, nursing from Syracuse University and University of Vermont, education from Harvard University and law from Georgetown University Law Center. One graduate received a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from Brown University before authoring three well-received novels and becoming a visiting professor at MIT. Others are teachers, law enforcement professionals, doctors and lawyers.

Thanks to the Urban Scholars program, low-income students from Boston, many of them students of color, are achieving their dreams.

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