

Title: Commonwealth Scholars

Background: Commonwealth Scholars is a statewide initiative that is transitioning to the administration of the Virginia Community Colleges from the Office of the Secretary of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia. The primary goal of Commonwealth Scholars is to increase the number of high school graduates who successfully complete a specified program of academic courses that are designed to prepare them to enter community colleges and universities ready to succeed. Commonwealth Scholars is targeted to “middle majority” and first generation students.

The Commonwealth Scholars program of study “raises the bar” in terms of math and science requirements. The curriculum includes: Algebra II, Biology, Chemistry and either Physics or Principles of Technology as well as two years of foreign language, and at least one career and technical education class. High school students who have successfully completed these courses receive a Commonwealth Scholars medal on behalf of the Governor at high school graduation ceremonies. The Commonwealth Scholars program of study, and correlating high school outreach activities to promote college and career readiness, are introduced to students beginning in 8th grade. Commonwealth Scholars orientations for 8th grade students and the educators who work with them are led by regional employers. These orientations have the objective of demonstrating the connection between rigorous high school academic courses and future college and career opportunities.

The Governor’s Office, which has been closely involved in bringing the Commonwealth Scholars program to 18 school divisions in Virginia, approached the VCCS about transitioning state leadership of Commonwealth Scholars programs to the community college system. The Governor’s Office was particularly interested in expanding a model of Commonwealth Scholars that is currently in practice at Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC). In the PVCC model of Commonwealth Scholars, the community college is the regional leader of program activities, and Commonwealth Scholars is aligned with PVCC’s workforce development and career pathways operations. Every school division in the PVCC service region participates in Commonwealth Scholars and the college’s Tech Prep consortium includes Commonwealth Scholars in its annual management plan and budget.

Through the support of the Governor’s Office, in 2009-10, the VCCS and PVCC, working collaboratively, will serve as the new state leaders for the Commonwealth Scholars program. \$30,000 grants for the period 1 July 2009 to 30 June 2010 will be available for 2009-10 for six community colleges, including PVCC, to demonstrate community college-led Commonwealth Scholars programs. The six colleges to demonstrate the new model of Commonwealth Scholars will be selected through competitive application to the VCCS. To strengthen sustainability of the program, colleges will need to demonstrate that their approach to leading regional Commonwealth Scholars programs will be aligned with other workforce development and career pathway initiatives coordinated by the college, in particular Tech Prep and Career Coaches.

To assist colleges in preparing grant applications, the VCCS has held a series of Webinars on the Commonwealth Scholars program to which Tech Prep and Career Pathways leaders from each college were invited. Additionally, grant application materials are available on the VCCS Web site at www.vccs.edu/workforce/grants.

Resource Persons:

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