

CURE Scholars See Higher Education on the Horizon

January 22, 2019 | By [Jena Frick](#)

On a cold Saturday in January with snow in the forecast, 22 CURE Scholars braved the frigid air to tour the campus of [Coppin State University](#) in Baltimore. Their visit not only gave them a look at the university, but it also provided a window into what they could potentially accomplish.

The journey toward higher education started for these students four years ago when they became the first cohort of the [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) (UMB) [CURE Scholars Program](#), a unique mentoring/STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education program aimed at reducing racial disparities in public health by establishing a pipeline to careers in STEM. The program is funded by a National Cancer Institute grant to the University of Maryland Marlene and Stewart Greenbaum Comprehensive Cancer Center.



Marcus Edwards, a CSU admissions counselor and CSU alumnus, took the CURE scholars on a private tour of Coppin State University.

Now in high school, these scholars have “graduated” to CURE Connections (C2). C2 is a continuation of the CURE Program, funded by the [National Institute of General Medical Sciences Science Education Partnership Award](#) (SEPA), that is specifically designed for ninth- and 10th-grade students.

“A main component of our grant from SEPA is to get the scholars college-ready,” explains **Bret Hassel, PhD**, principal investigator of the grant for C2 and an associate professor in the Department of Microbiology and Immunology at the [University of Maryland School of Medicine](#). “We have great schools to choose from within the [University System of Maryland](#), so taking them on an actual visit was an obvious activity.”

On Jan. 12, the scholars ventured over to Coppin State University (CSU) for a special day trip that included a full tour of the CSU Science and Technology Building and a hands-on lab activity in the university’s chemistry lab.

(View a [photo gallery](#).)

"We know that the CURE Program is all about helping students succeed in STEM, which is something we heavily support," says Fred Nesbitt, PhD, MS, a CSU professor of chemistry who helped facilitate the visit. "It seemed like a perfect match for them to come to CSU and get a hands-on experience in one of our laboratories."

Nesbitt was there to greet the scholars when they arrived on campus and introduce them to their tour guide, Marcus Edwards, a CSU admissions counselor and CSU alumnus. Edwards instantly grabbed the scholars' attention with an ice-breaker game that got them up and moving, before sharing information and answering questions about CSU academics, financial aid, and campus life. Shortly after his presentation, Edwards and the scholars bundled up and headed out the door for a full tour of the campus.

"Some students never have the opportunity to visit a college campus," explains Edwards. "Having them see the campus and be introduced to different universities at such an early age is vital in helping them choose a college."

The scholars got to see all of the student hot spots on campus, including the dining halls, rec center, basketball court, and student quad. For Demetris Beatty, a Woodlawn High School student who dreams of working for NASA, this part of visit really helped her to visualize herself attending a university.

"It's fun, and it feels more like I'm experiencing college," says Demetris. "It's really helping me to see all lot of capabilities that would come with going to college."

Demetris also expressed interest in joining a sorority, so it was kismet when the tour group ran into a group of sisters from Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically black sorority. The sorority women took a couple of minutes to talk to the scholars about the benefits of getting involved in Greek life as well as their experience attending CSU.

This spontaneous connection hit an important part of the C2 programming, which is to have the scholars interact with college students of their same background. According to Hassel, this is a vital step in helping the scholars see their own potential through the experience of others.

"The goal is to really get them to understand that higher education is a path that's doable for them," explains Hassel. "We want to get them comfortable with the college environment in general, and actually being on a campus — regardless of which one it is — really helps them to say to themselves, 'Yes, I can do this.' "

The guides at CSU did their due diligence to show the scholars that higher education is possible for them both academically and financially. During the morning presentation, Edwards made sure to explain CSU's "Finish 4 Free" program. This unique program would allow students who attend a Baltimore City high school and receive an associate degree from Baltimore City Community College the opportunity to finish their undergraduate education at CSU free of tuition charge.

"I think most kids are really taken with the idea about going away to school," says **Stephanie Alphee**, one of the coordinators of the C2 program, "but showing them there's such a great and affordable institution right in their backyard opens up their idea of college and what's available to them."

Within the [University System of Maryland](#), there are more than a dozen great institutions for them to explore "in their own backyard." In fact, earlier this semester the scholars had the opportunity to visit Towson University and tour that campus as well.

With two visits under their belts, the C2 scholars are already ahead of the curve in prepping for higher education. Many high school students do not normally begin visiting college campuses until their sophomore or junior year. In addition to touring campuses, the scholars are preparing for college in many other ways. They're working with their mentors every week to prep for their PSATs, getting homework support, staying on track for advanced college prep courses, and making sure their grades stay up so that college remains an option for them.

"The whole point of the CURE Program is not just to expose kids to the pipeline toward careers in STEM, but to also make sure that they have the tools to be successful in that pipeline from high school to college and beyond," says Alphee.

Looking ahead to 10th and 11th grade, Alphee hopes to be able to plan a couple of out-of-state college visits for the scholars. In the meantime, the next stop on their higher education tour will be the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

See YouTube <https://youtu.be/CiruFHuTuBg>