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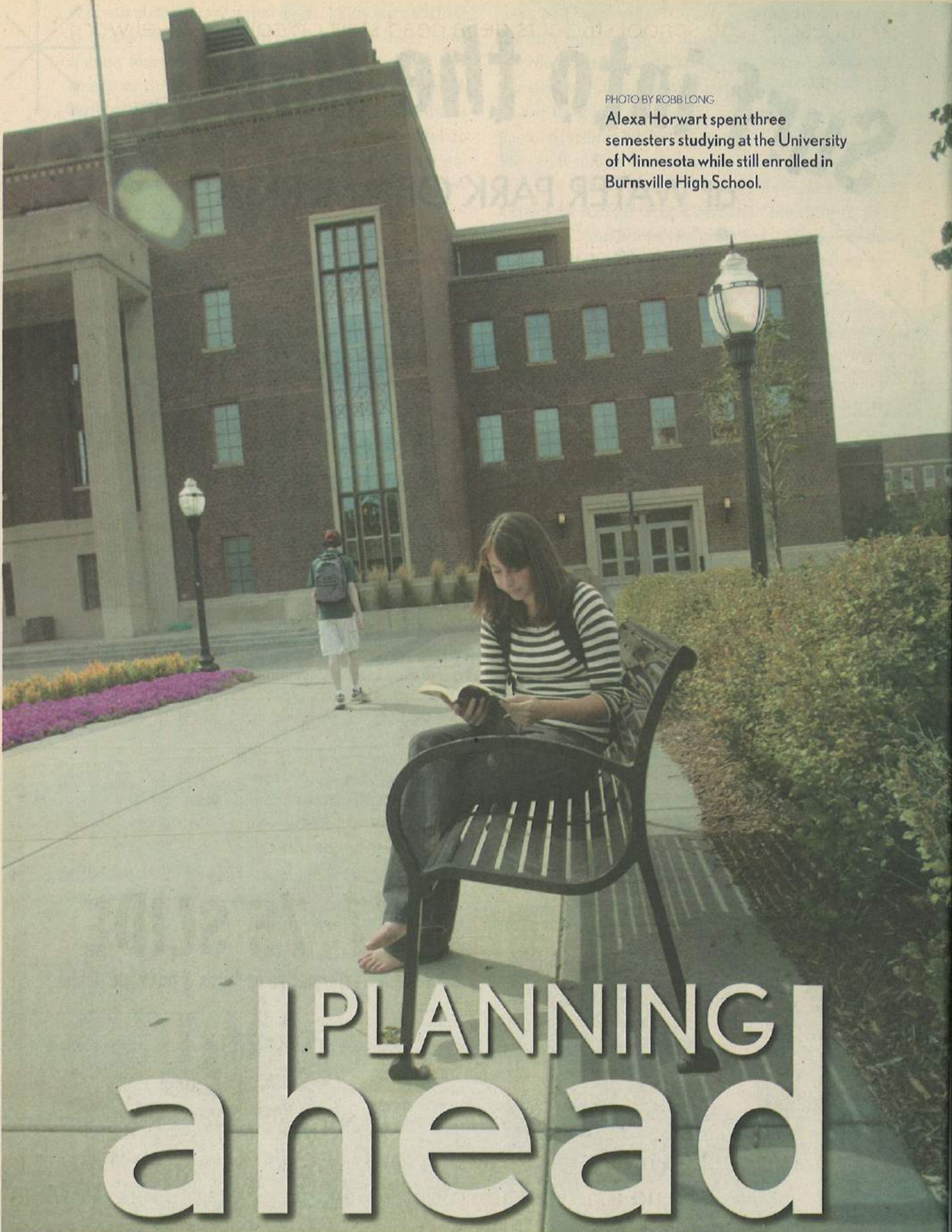


PHOTO BY ROBB LONG

Alexa Horwart spent three semesters studying at the University of Minnesota while still enrolled in Burnsville High School.

# PLANNING ahead

# Minnesota high school students get a head start on college-level work

BY C.C. STROM

Alexa Horwart was looking for a challenge. The journalism and creative writing courses she wanted to take weren't offered at her high school. She preferred writing essays to completing the worksheets her teachers often assigned for homework. "Academically, it wasn't really right for me," she says of her alma mater.

After learning about the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program from friends in the fall of her junior year, Alexa quickly applied to the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus and enrolled for the spring semester. Alexa spent the next three semesters as a full-time student at the university while enrolled at Burnsville High School. The state of Minnesota paid for her college courses and books. By the time she graduated from high

school, she had enough college credits to be a sophomore when she started Drake University in Des Moines this fall.

Alexa was one of 7,428 Minnesota students to take advantage of the PSEO program in the 2005-2006 school year. The number of participants doubled in the first 20 years of the program. Approved by the Minnesota Legislature in 1985, the PSEO program

created a system for high school juniors and seniors to enroll in local colleges. They receive both high school and college credit for the classes. Students attending public, private, and home schools are eligible for the program. To participate, they must apply to and be admitted by one of over 50 colleges active in the program. They can enroll in any nonsectarian course. By state law, PSEO students can still participate in high school activities, including

graduation ceremonies.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options gives students the opportunity to take more challenging or specialized classes in a more diverse and mature setting. They can take one evening course at a community college, attend a private university full-time, or take a class online. Course books and fees are also covered by state funding. Some colleges allow students to live on campus, but housing costs are not covered by the state.

Students who participate in PSEO rate it highly. A study conducted in the fall of 2005 by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota reported that 97 percent of students surveyed were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their PSEO experience.

According to the study, students see the main benefits as: learning more in college than in high school; saving money because tuition was free; saving time because they could get high school and college credit at the same time; learning what to expect in a college environment; and being challenged more than in high school.

Other anecdotal benefits include colleges offering better facilities for science or language labs than high schools and smaller class sizes for some courses.

Students do report some problems with the program but no major drawbacks. Initially, students might have to seek out PSEO information from their high school. After enrolling, they might find scheduling courses with two different institutions and getting back and forth between two schools problematic. Other students find it difficult to continue to participate in high school activities.

## The student experience

Mira Lippold-Johnson is a senior at South High School in Minneapolis and is typical of PSEO participants. Girls and metropolitan students are more likely to participate in PSEO than boys or students living in rural areas. Mira also chose to attend college part-time, as do 70 percent of PSEO participants. Mira was lured to the more demanding and specialized courses offered at the University of Minnesota. But, being active in orchestra and the rugby club, Mira also wanted to stay >

## Postsecondary Enrollment Options

**WHAT IT IS:** A state program allowing high school juniors and seniors to take college classes, earning high school and college credit at the same time

**WHO PAYS:** The state covers tuition and books; students cover transportation and living expenses (if they live on campus)

**CONDITIONS:** Students must be accepted by one of 50 participating colleges and universities

Postsecondary Enrollment Options students can take one evening course at a community college, attend a private university full-time, or take a class online.

connected to her school. She liked the idea of attending both college and high school so she could become familiar with college before attending full-time. "It's a way of easing the transition," she explains.

John Fidler felt disconnected from his high school and was ready for college by the spring of his senior year. He decided to enroll at Normandale Community College in Bloomington full-time for his final semester of high school. Attending Normandale "was very different [from high school] because a community college attracts students from all different walks of life, all different economic backgrounds," he shares. "It's very diverse, and I liked that." John graduated from Bloomington Jefferson High School in 2003 and finished college only three years later. He's now employed in marketing and advertising with USA Today and recommends PSEO to almost anyone.

Spending part or all of the day at college and away from high school can affect the student's social interactions and activities. But by the junior or senior year of high school, most students have an established group of friends. With e-mail, cell phones, and text messaging, students can easily stay in touch with their friends and not miss out on social activities.

"It is some work seeing your friends after school because you don't see them as often. That's definitely a sacrifice," says Alexa Horwart, who kept in touch with friends with text messaging. But, "I still made it to all the football games and the dances!"

### Planning to enroll

Enrolling in PSEO takes some preparation. Parents should talk with their children in early high school about career and education plans, recommends Linda Con- ➤

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— John Fidler, Bloomington Jefferson High School, class of 2003

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John Fidler got a jump on college, and on his career, at Normandale Community College.

ley, the Minneapolis Public Schools program facilitator for guidance and counseling. Even if students don't have specific career goals or interests "they should be laying out a plan for what they're going to do in high school," she explains. That plan should include the type of college they might like to attend, what classes they must take to fulfill graduation requirements, the subjects they most enjoy, and if they want to try taking a college course or participate in PSEO.

Students don't need to be at the top of their class to participate in PSEO, but they do need a high level of maturity. Conley says community colleges can be a great introduction to college for many students. "They shouldn't be overlooked because they have a wealth of programs." In fact, the Center for School Change reported that 74 percent of PSEO students in 2004-2005 attended community or technical colleges or state universities that are part of the Minnesota State Colleges and University system.

While schools are required to inform 10th- and 11th-grade students of the Postsecondary Enrollment Options by March 1, that notification is often overlooked. Students might need to seek out the information from their school counselor. Schools request students inform them of their PSEO plans by March 30, but students aren't bound by that date.

Students who want to participate in PSEO must apply to the college they want to attend and have their parents and school counselor sign a state student registration form. The state of Minnesota Department of Education web site lists the colleges that participate in the program. Each college has its own application process, requirements, and limits for enrollment, so students >

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need to contact the colleges for detailed information.

Danielle Tisinger, Ph.D., is the program coordinator for the Advanced High School Student Services office at the University of Minnesota and administers the university's PSEO program. "I always recommend starting with the web site," she says to students who ask about PSEO at other colleges. If they can't find PSEO information on a web site, they should call the admissions office.

Students planning to participate in the Postsecondary Enrollment Options should be independent, responsible, and mature. To be successful, they need to be able to manage courses without frequent deadlines and understand that their grade may depend on only one or two tests rather than several assignments, as is common in high school. To ensure they meet all requirements for high school graduation, students must work closely with their school counselor when registering for

courses and deliver their college grades to their high school. If a student feels overwhelmed by a class, they should have the maturity to ask for help or withdraw from the class, since PSEO grades are part of an official college transcript.

Tisinger works with about 600 PSEO students at the University of Minnesota and sees time management as the biggest challenge for many of them. Part of time management is limiting the number of outside activities, she says. She recommends parents help their children determine their extracurricular involvement. If students are involved in many activities, as well as taking college and high school courses, they could be setting themselves up for a poor academic performance and disappointment in themselves. "Even though it does look good that students are doing advanced work, if they aren't doing well in advanced work, that could

74 percent of PSEO students in 2004–2005 attended community or technical colleges or state universities that are part of the Minnesota State Colleges and University system.

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hurt them more than not having done it at all," cautions Tisinger.

For many students, transportation is a big issue. Tisinger encourages parents to talk with their child about how he or she will get to college before enrolling in PSEO. Select students can apply for travel reimbursement, but they are responsible for their own transportation. Often, that can take a significant amount of time away from studying and leisure activities.

The draw of college credit and free tuition is hard for many parents and students to resist. For students intent on attending a prestigious college on the East or West Coast, though, it may not be the best option. In general, elite colleges located far from Minnesota are less likely to accept PSEO credits for transfer. For some students, that isn't an issue. But for students with financial concerns, enrolling in PSEO and then attending a public college in Minnesota or Wisconsin can cut tuition costs dramatically.

The PSEO experience — whether it's one community college course or several semesters at the University of Minnesota — can change students' lives. After attending the University of Minnesota, Alexa Horwart realized she wanted to attend a smaller college. Having

### For more information

University of Minnesota Advanced High School Students  
Services Office

cce.umn.edu/ahs

Minnesota Postsecondary Enrollment Options

(on the Minnesota Department of Education's site)

tinyurl.com/jwy56

The Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota

tinyurl.com/k2mh2

Center for School Change Report on Postsecondary  
Enrollment Options in Minnesota

tinyurl.com/k2mh2

already learned how to write college essays, manage her time, and study for demanding courses, she feels well prepared for her years at Drake University in Iowa and is grateful for her PSEO experience. "It's a great program. You can get free college. You can meet so many different people," she reports. "I'd recommend it to anyone."

C.C. Strom is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer. ★



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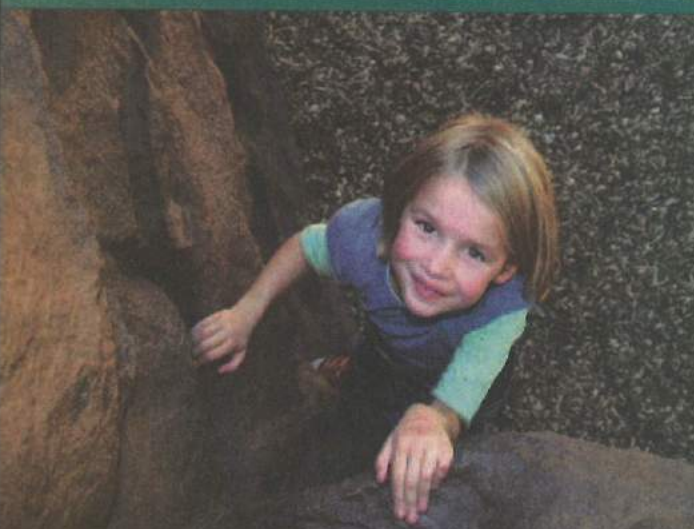
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