



The Illinois Education Foundation helped nurse Jeana Davis manage her time while she attended Olive Henry College. "I couldn't have done it" otherwise, she says. | BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES

## Program invests in student success

COMMUNITY COLLEGES | Provides money, mentors

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When Jeana Davis couldn't afford the costs of her nursing certification exam, the Illinois Education Foundation kicked in the \$340 for the test and required fingerprints.

When Davis was almost failing a chemistry and microbiology class at Olive Henry College, a coordinator with the foundation helped her plan a schedule that let her get her homework done while holding a bartending job and helping her four kids with their studies.

And when she was wondering whether she could finish her degree, a mentor who was also a parent and a nurse offered encouragement.

"If it hadn't been for that help, I couldn't have done it," said Davis, 36, now a nurse and living on the South Side.

All these things are features of a relatively new scholarship program for Illinois community college students — one that will soon expand greatly after an

infusion of \$250,000 in state cash. More than 50 students have received aid, and the three-year goal is to help at least 200.

The private, nonprofit Illinois Education Foundation differs from other scholarship programs in that money isn't just for the best and the brightest, and isn't just for tuition. The program provides mentors, tutors, time-management help and seminars.

### GPA can be as low as 2.0

Low-income high schoolers with a grade point average as low as 2.0 can apply. Program director Katonja Webb said they are looking for students who "showed improvement" in high school.

The money is "last dollar" funding that covers costs after federal and state financial aid. It can be used for anything from student fees and textbooks to bus fare and child care.

Program co-founder Dave Scherer notes government financial aid programs can be inefficient: Eligible students get money based on in-

come, but there is no guarantee they'll finish with a degree. That's why, when he and others set out to create a scholarship to honor a business partner — Daniel M. Kerrane Jr., who died of cancer in 2002 — the organizers wanted to create a program that would help ensure student success.

This fall, more than 90 percent of the students who were in the program last spring kept up their grades and re-enrolled in school. Several have transferred to four-year bachelor's programs.

The overall retention rate for first-time, full-time students at City Colleges of Chicago ranges from 34 percent at Olive Harvey to 60 percent at Wright College, federal data shows. City College officials have said the numbers are misleading, because they don't include all students who transfer to other schools. But everyone agrees the numbers at all community colleges could be better.

"So many kids are going there, but unfortunately they are not making it," Scherer said.