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For some high school seniors, December is end of road

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When most of his senior classmates at Athens High School are putting on their green and white caps and gowns, Kevin Cline plans to have one semester of college already under his belt.

Kevin decided to graduate early his senior year. Instead of sticking around for school club meetings and for his last prom, Kevin will move to Florida, work as an intern with Disney and get a head start on his life come January.

At least, that's the plan.

"I'm ready to get out of high school and get started with college," he said.

And there are quite a few students in the area who feel the same way.

In the Springfield school district alone, more than 100 high school seniors have applied for early graduation this year with 32 applicants at Southeast High School, 41 at Lanphier and 44 at Springfield High School.

These students will find out if they'll be leaving early after they take final examinations this month.

Students have various reasons for wanting to move on before their classmates.

Kevin has academic and career reasons in mind for graduating early. Once he graduates, Kevin will attend the technical school WyoTech in Daytona. From there, he will work on motorcycles, while pursuing an acting career. His plan is to get started with an internship at Disney World, which will begin in January and end in October 2010.

To prepare for his decision, Kevin had to talk to Athens school counselor Joann Benz and the school board last year. This meant filling out a form and writing a paragraph about his future plans. Once the school approved his decision, which happened at the end of his junior year, he was able to plan his classes accordingly.

The only adjustment was taking government and consumer classes in the same semester, courses typically taken in separate semesters.

Chris Woodward of Rochester High School also decided to graduate in December, but he won't be leaving Sangamon County any time soon. Chris plans to begin classes at Lincoln Land Community College in January and continue there until he earns an associate's degree.

He then plans to transfer to Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and major in psychology.

"I don't want to be in high school anymore," he said, "I don't enjoy general classes and there are little electives focusing on my interest."

Springfield High School senior Danielle Ceja is another student who will graduate early to begin her college work. She plans to attend LLCC for a semester before transferring to Illinois State University in Normal.

To prepare, Danielle had to adjust her high school academic load. She took two literature classes to make up for one year's worth of curriculum, and also an American history class.

Pros and cons

All three students cite advantages to graduating early.

"The socially-acceptable advantage is to get a head start on my future — which is true.

Realistically, I'm just ready to be done with high school," Chris said.

Danielle said she is taking a number of electives this semester “to equal up my seven (required) classes (per semester). It is ridiculous. I figured that instead I could use this time to get a head start on college.”

Even though these students will be getting started on college work, there are a few disadvantages of getting out of high school early.

“There will be more expected of me,” Chris said. “In high school, I didn’t have to try — now I’m going to.”

“I’m going to miss my high school friends,” Kevin said, though he still plans to attend prom and graduation. At Athens, attending prom is not allowed if you’re a graduated student, but Kevin is going to attend with another Athens student.

From a financial standpoint, there are disadvantages to graduating early — particularly for those who want to go to college.

“Students graduating early will miss out on spring scholarships,” said Benz, the Athens counselor. “Graduating early can affect financial aid and mess up the overall financial calendar. It can be weird with college-bound students.”

The process of graduating early is different for every school. Students interested in graduating early should talk to a guidance counselor their junior year and begin to think about their plans, Benz said.

Donna Povse, post-secondary coach at Springfield High School, said SHS students don’t “get their diploma until their class graduates.” This means that students get an “early dismissal” instead of an actual graduation.

This policy doesn’t affect a student’s chance of getting into college, though. Amanda Bly, an admissions counselor at University of Illinois Springfield, said that early high school graduates may now start classes at UIS in the spring due to a new policy.

“Until recently,” Bly said, “students with 11 transferable (college) semester hours or less were only allowed to begin in the fall semester.” But now, December high school graduates can enroll for spring semester at UIS if a high school guidance counselor writes a letter verifying that the student graduated from high school early.

To get to that point, however, takes a big decision. Emotions are typically mixed when the thought of graduating high school enters a student’s mind. Doing it a semester early seems to heighten those feelings.

“I’m ready to see what the world has to offer, but I’ll miss my class,” Kevin said. “We’ve all gone through so much in the time we’ve shared together.”

“I am excited, I get to step out into a whole new world,” Danielle said. “I am taking my ambition and turning it into something. Going on to the next thing — that’s really exciting for me.”

Jessie Knoles is a senior at Athens High School.