Riverside County Office of Education and UCR Extension partner to create new horizons for at-risk youth
If you think back to high school, do you remember the details of the tests you took or the reports you wrote? More likely, you remember your favorite field trip or your winning debate—where you discovered a new skill or passion. You may also remember the teachers who inspired you, empowered you, and believed in you. Through a thriving partnership, Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE) and UCR Extension create those lifetime moments for at-risk youth in the Inland Empire. They provide hands-on learning opportunities, mentorship, and new pathways for students who may not believe in the possibility of a bright future.

Led by Dr. Charles Fischer, executive director of alternative education, RCOE provides opportunities to students who haven’t been successful in public school. “We’re like a school district with an aim to expand students’ horizons and gain skills in particular areas, especially technology,” Dr. Fischer said. “Our partnership with UCR Extension allows us to offer blended learning opportunities students may not have had otherwise. In our on-campus program and new high school IT certificate series, they develop the skills needed for high-demand jobs.”

The latest facet of the partnership is the inventive dual-enrollment Computer Tech program. Patrick Roskam, owner and CEO of CaliCoders and a UCR Extension instructor, described the series as “a professional certification course built into a regular high school schedule. We provide students with the real-world foundational skills they need to work in the IT industry. Online learning combined with hands-on education prepares students for CompTIA certification exams.”

The Computer Tech pilot program has met with glowing reviews from students, as well. “At the program graduation, the impact was palpable,” said Roskam. “Every student shook my hand and told me what the opportunity to gain a new skill set meant to them. That’s when it hit me: this partnership is helping kids who previously saw very few options for themselves to set new horizons.”

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RCOE and UCR Extension also partnered on a new summer bridge program. “Many of the kids we serve with this on-campus program don’t have the social capital or familial background where college is discussed,” said Webb. “By hosting them on the UCR campus, we’re putting them in a situation to think about higher education. In our hands-on STEAM program, for example, students engage with NASA scientists and UCR researchers. Our goal is to hook their interest in higher education through experiences that create lifetime memories.”

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