

ISAC
COLLEGE
ACCESS &
OUTREACH:
Empowering
Students
Statewide



We believe that **EVERY STUDENT in Illinois** deserves the information and support they need to get on their path to education after high school.

We deliver. To more than 1.3 million Illinois students ... and counting.

As the college access and financial aid agency in Illinois, the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) makes access to postsecondary education possible for more students than any other college access program operating in Illinois – public, private, or nonprofit – and delivers one of the largest and most modeled college access programs in the country.

Many college access programs are extremely successful in assisting a small group of individual students. Some programs focus only on students who are already motivated high achievers. Others are targeted only to specific cities or schools, or only to the highest-need students, and do not have the interest, breadth of relationships, resources, or the ability to scale to meet the needs of every student where they are.

The college access services provided by ISAC and the Illinois Student Assistance Corps (ISACorps) are free and available to every student in Illinois, no matter where they live, what elementary, middle, or high school they attend, no matter what path to education after high school might work for them – from a certificate to a trade school to a two- or four-year degree. Our research-backed programs and capacity are unmatched in Illinois.

A Leader in Best Practice College Access Programming

ISAC was created by the state legislature in 1957 to address income inequality and barriers to higher education and was the first in the nation to, among many other “firsts”: use the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) as the single application for state need-based aid, allowing students to apply for federal and state help with a single form; use data-matching to support high schools with student FAFSA completion; and launch statewide near-peer mentoring.

Since 2009, ISAC has hired more than 700 ISACorps members who have served more than 1.3 million students and parents across the entire state. The ISACorps are expertly trained near-peer mentors, hired directly out of college to serve a two-year term at locations statewide helping students and their families prepare for education after high school. The ISACorps receive full-time training that provides more classroom hours than some graduate degree programs (over 450 classroom hours in the two-year term), and 3,000 hours of on-the-job experience focused on assisting students in overcoming the barriers to education after high school.

While the ISACorps focus their efforts on working with students who are low income and those whose families have no prior college-going experience, as a state agency our programs are open to all who live in Illinois, regardless of income, postsecondary experience, or location within the state. We help students and families across the state navigate through the college, career, and financial aid planning processes. Our goal is to make education after high school more accessible and affordable.



Near-Peer Mentorship Engages More Students

The ISACorps program follows a near-peer mentorship model, based on significant evidence that students are more likely to interact with someone who is more like them, who has had similar experiences, is closer to their age, and may have come from their

home town or a similar background. Every effort is made to recruit ISACorps members who were first generation college students and who come from or went to school in the Illinois community to which they will be assigned.

“[T]he benefits of peer leadership are vast. Students are often more likely to build a rapport and take guidance from someone with whom they can closely relate, and peers can offer a sense of community and connection that goes beyond what ... staff members are able to provide.”¹

Members of the ISAC leadership team have provided training, professional development, technical assistance, extensive research and analysis, and implementation support to schools, districts, state agencies, states, community-based organizations, non-profits, corporations, and even senior staff at the U.S. Department of Education and the White House.

The staff leading ISAC’s College Access & Outreach and Capacity Development & Training efforts were also first generation college students themselves. Like the ISACorps members they recruit, they understand what it is like to be the first — the first to attend high school, the first to take calculus, the first to take an ACT or SAT, the first to apply for financial aid, the first to complete an admission application, the first to graduate from high school, the first to set foot on a college campus, the first to leave home, the first to join the military prior to college, the first to attend college, the first to pay for college, the first to struggle in a college class, the first to choose a major, the first to graduate, the first to balance student loan debt, and the first to help the rest of their extended family navigate the same process.

Higher education theory and research demonstrate that near peers play an important role in student success and can

affect students’ transition to college, satisfaction, learning and academic performance, and persistence and retention. They can have a particularly profound impact on first generation, marginalized, and historically underrepresented students.

ISACorps members pay it forward — they use the knowledge and experience they gained on their postsecondary path to help others in their community reach their postsecondary education goals.

“Studies of peers and their effect on the experiences of first generation graduate and undergraduate students reach similar conclusions: peers, particularly student role models, fulfill a unique need and provide a positive influence on the transition and success of first generation college students.”²

¹ See e.g., Kashtan, Paula. “A New Near-Peer Coaching Program Strives to Keep Incoming Freshmen on Course.” *The Education Trust*, 10 June, 2021, edtrust.org/resource/a-new-near-peer-coaching-program-strives-to-keep-incoming-freshmen-on-course/

² Shook, Jamie L. and Jennifer R. Keup. “The Benefits of Peer Leader Programs: An Overview from the Literature.” *New Directions for Higher Education*, no. 157, Spring 2012, Wiley Periodicals, Inc, www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/pltc/files/faculty/shook_keup_2012_benefits_of_peer_leader_programs.pdf.

Outreach Services and Resources Available to All, Customized for Each Student

The ISACorps provide workshops, presentations, and one-on-one mentoring for students and families, assisting them with career exploration, college selection, scholarship searches, application completion, and the financial aid process. In addition, ISACorps members host and provide support for events across the state during the College Changes Everything® campaign in the fall and throughout the year. As near-peer mentors, the ISACorps not only provide direct assistance to students navigating the path to college, but also support students in developing non-cognitive skills and in building a college-going identity.

While ISAC's offerings are high quality, time-tested, assessed by both internal and external evaluators, and offered at no cost, they are never one size fits all. Every student is different, and customization and representation are at the core of our work.

Building College Awareness and Identity: Developing Non-Cognitive Skills

A significant portion of our intensive six-week training for all ISACorps members focuses on theory and practical work in helping to identify and develop non-cognitive skill sets and a college-going identity. Built on a model that focuses on identity-based motivation to develop a pathway to success for students, a central premise in our work is recognizing that while almost all students raise their hands when asked if they *want* to go to college, that doesn't mean they *believe* they will go to college. In between raising their hands and actually setting foot on campus is a long process of identity development and other developmental milestones. A student believes college is possible only after they have received enough information to move from imagination to possibility.

So, this is where we begin. We study these milestones in our training; our ISACorps members self-reflect on their critical milestones, and then we bring this work with us when we connect with students and schools.



After attending a presentation by ISAC College Access & Outreach Director Jacqueline Moreno (standing, right) at a National GEAR UP Conference, 17 principals and superintendents of middle and high schools in Hawaii visited ILGU schools in Illinois to gain insights and share best practices to improve college readiness and success. Shown here: Moreno and ISAC Director of Capacity Development & Training Eddie Brambila (seated in back, second from left) with members of the Hawaii delegation.

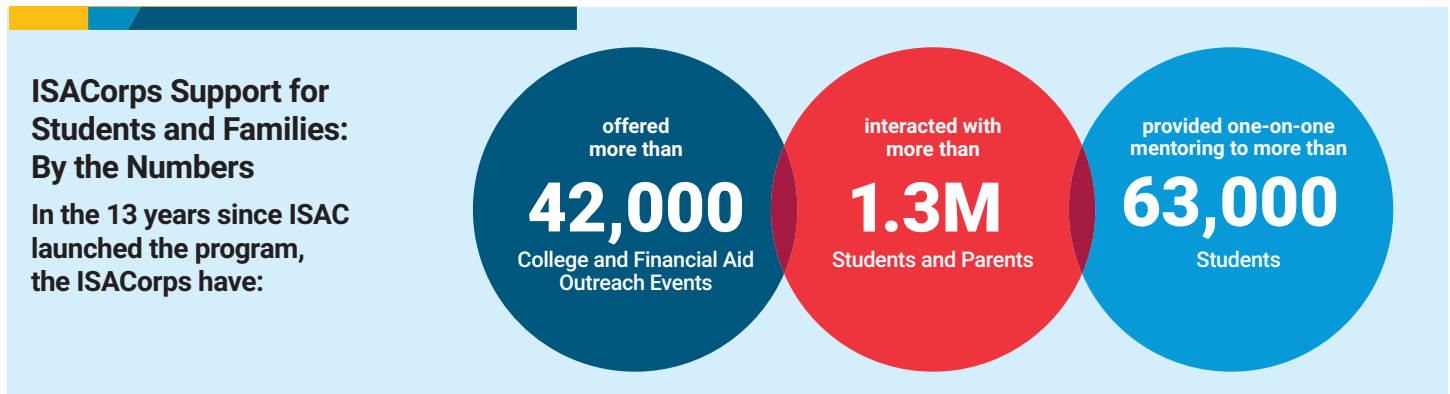


In large part because of the depth and breadth of ISAC's experience in working directly with schools and with students and parents to help develop college and career readiness, in 2016 ISAC was awarded a competitive statewide federal GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) Grant by the U.S. Department of Education. The award, which is made for seven years, allowed ISAC to formally expand its college access programming at participating schools to serve students through middle and high school and their first postsecondary year. ISAC's statewide Illinois GEAR UP (ILGU) project brought the GEAR UP program to students outside of the Chicago metropolitan area for the first time since the grant was created in 1998. In addition to the many thousands of students served by the ISACorps each year, ILGU currently serves almost 10,000 students in 17 high-need middle schools and 16 high schools participating in ILGU.

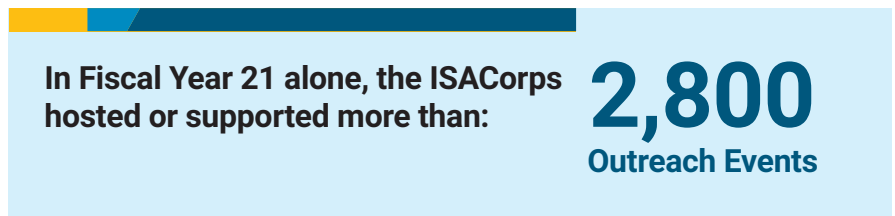
ILGU schools use ISAC's developmental curriculum to build non-cognitive skills and pro-college behaviors that can assist students in making successful transitions and improve the likelihood of success in college. ILGU also provides assistance with academic preparation, support in the transition from high school to college, and support and assistance in building a college-going culture within middle and high schools.

Extensive Support in the College Planning and Financial Aid Process

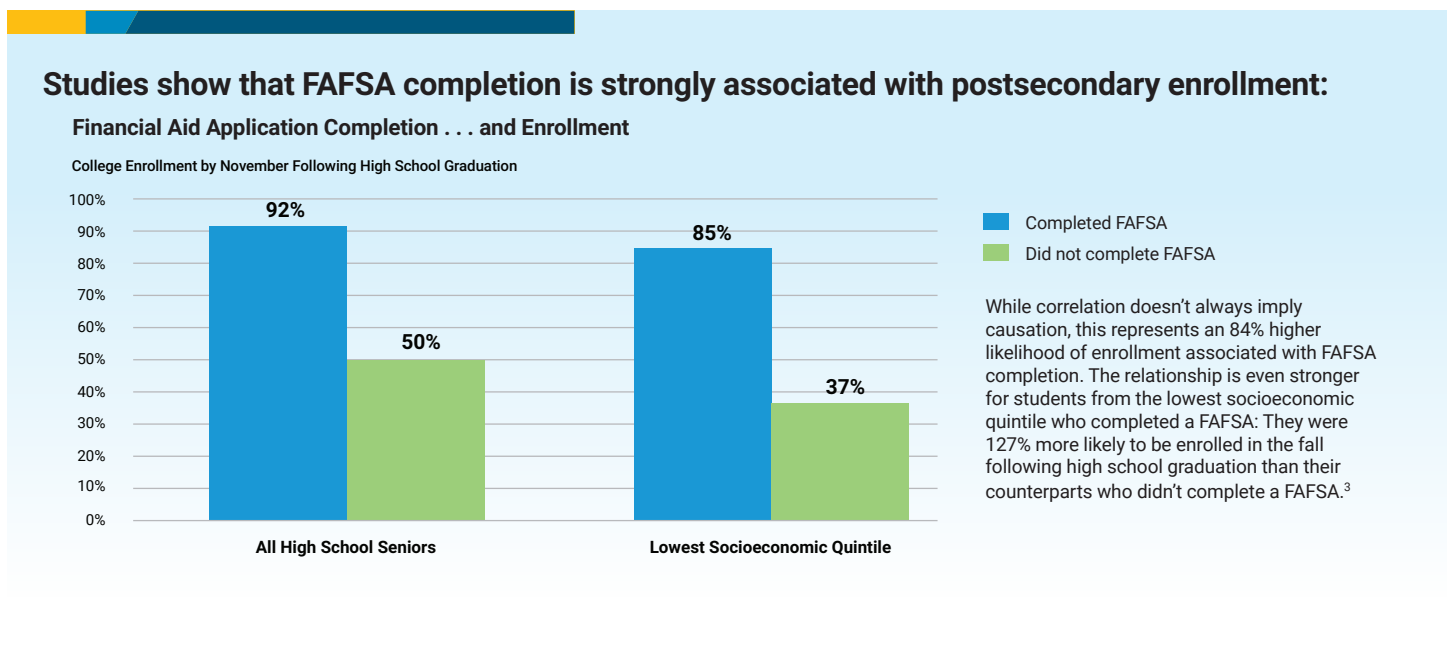
On average, the ISACorps have reached more than 74,000 students and more than 22,000 parents each year through outreach events alone.



ISACorps events include college prep sessions, such as “College 101” and presentations on the college application process, as well as college application workshops. Our financial aid workshops include introductory presentations about the different types of financial aid and the process, as well as financial aid application completion workshops where students can complete and submit their financial aid application with the assistance of an ISACorps member.



Since the inception of the ISACorps in 2009, more than 88,000 students and 64,000 parents have attended an ISAC FAFSA/ Financial Aid Application Workshop. Completing an application is a significant milestone in putting students on a path to postsecondary education.



³ DeBaun, Bill. “Survey Data Strengthen Association Between FAFSA Completion and Enrollment.” *National College Access Network*, 4 Apr., 2019, www.ncan.org/news/456025/Survey-Data-Strengthen-Association-Between-FAFSA-Completion-and-Enrollment.htm.

Events and one-on-one sessions are not the only way ISAC connects and provides support to students and families. ISAC provides direct support to more than 10,000 subscribers to our free and robust text messaging service, where students can get college planning and financial aid questions answered by ISAC experts and receive alerts on important deadlines. We also provide extensive parent outreach.



ISAC College Q&A

Studies suggest that text messaging combined with near-peer mentoring can have a substantial positive impact on college enrollment. An automated and personalized text messaging campaign to remind students of required pre-matriculation tasks and to connect them to counselor-based support, combined with outreach and support from near-peer mentors, increased college enrollment by over seven percentage points among students who had less academic-year access to quality college counseling or information.⁴

As a college access program, no organization in Illinois has connected with more students and families across the state to provide them with information about postsecondary opportunities and support in navigating the path to education after high school.

In Fiscal Year 21 alone, more than 700 high schools took advantage of one or more of ISAC's outreach programs.

More Than Sixty Years of Experience in Almost Every Aspect of College Access and Financial Aid

ISAC's depth and breadth of experience and success in college access and financial aid programs makes it a go-to expert and resource for sister agencies, legislators, high schools, and non-profit organizations statewide and on a national level.

Our programs not only serve students and parents directly, but also support high schools and other providers in making education after high school possible for the students they serve. Our FAFSA Completion Initiative (data-matching program), which allows schools to focus their limited resources on helping students who have not yet filed a FAFSA or Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid, was so successful that the U.S. Department of Education launched a nationwide program based on the Illinois model for schools around the country. The program, combined with ISAC's supports and collaboration with high schools statewide, helped move ISAC from #13 to a national rank of #6 in the nation for high school senior FAFSA completions in the first year (2020-21) of implementation of the state's FAFSA requirement for public high school seniors – despite the requirement launching in the midst of the pandemic.

As a member of the extensive group of Illinois stakeholders and subject matter experts to develop a tool called the Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework, ISAC is now the lead agency and trainer for PaCE, developing and providing materials, leadership training, and individualized support for schools, public and private college planning and support organizations, non-profits, and communities who wish to implement the framework or develop their own framework.

⁴ Castleman, Benjamin, L. and Lindsay C Page. "Summer Nudging: Can Personalized Text Messages and Peer Mentor Outreach Increase College Going Among Low-Income High School Graduates?" *EdPolicyWorks*, University of Virginia, April 2013, https://education.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/resourceLibrary/9_Castleman_SummerTextMessages.pdf. For instance, students in Lawrence and Springfield, MA assigned to receive the texts were over seven percentage points more likely to enroll in college than their control group counterparts.



The PaCE Framework provides guidance to students, families, and educators on what types of experiences and information a student should have in order to make the most informed decisions about college and career planning, beginning in 8th grade and continuing through high school.

ISAC not only provides the leadership and facilitation of PaCE training for the state but is also a recognized expert in professional development and training on the FAFSA and Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid, ISAC scholarship and grant programs, and the financial aid process. ISAC provides free training and professional development on these topics to more than 1,000 professionals annually, including school counselors, financial aid administrators, independent college planning professionals, and participants from non-profit college access programs operating in Illinois, such as Bottom Line, TRIO programs, University of Chicago College Advising Corps, Chicago Scholars, Ladder Up, One Goal, One Million Degrees, and more than 60 other organizations.

ISAC's research team is renowned for statewide research reports and extensive data analysis on college access and financial aid topics – information that is regularly relied upon by state policy makers and education professionals in every sector.

Finally, ISAC's 60-plus years of administration of the state's financial aid programs, including the state's largest need-based grant, the Monetary Award Program (MAP) grant, lends deep expertise backed by data on successful equity-based programs and the supports necessary to create opportunity for all students.

MAP Provides Access and Opportunity to Illinois Students

\$480M in FY 22 → \$601M in FY 23



55%

More than half (55%) of MAP recipients have no financial resources for college



57%

of recipients are first generation college students



Of undergraduate students attending Illinois public universities who identify as Black or Hispanic, more than half receive a MAP Grant. Despite the additional financial – and sometimes social and academic – hurdles they face, data shows that MAP recipients graduate college at a similar rate as all students at the same school.



ISAC PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

ISAC Direct College Access Support to Students and Families

ISACorps

ISACorps presentations, workshops, and one-on-one assistance (college planning, non-cognitive supports, financial aid application completion, financial aid counseling and assistance, student loan information)



GEAR UP programming in middle and high schools

Parent Outreach Programs

ISAC College Q&A

ISAC Q&A Text Messaging



ISAC Student Portal Resources, including college and scholarship search, career tools, financial aid calculators and worksheets, ISAC College Minute™ videos, online ISAC grant/scholarship applications, and more

ISAC Training, Capacity-Building, and Other Resources



Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) Framework, Training and Materials

Financial Aid Training and other professional development; free to participants, and ISAC awards Continuing Education (CE) credits and Professional Development (PD) hours

Workshops and informational sessions for student loan borrowers on repayment and forgiveness programs



College Changes Everything® fall campaign support for schools and counselors (materials, hosting and/or support for college application and financial aid completion workshops)

FAFSA Data-Matching Program and Financial Aid Application Completion performance metrics and awards



ISAC Transcript Exchange (secure and free electronic delivery of HS transcripts)

COLLEGE CHANGES EVERYTHING® CONFERENCE

College Changes Everything® annual conference brings together educators, policymakers, non-profit and community-based organizations, public sector leaders, students, and other professionals to innovate and collaborate in addressing best practices, ideas, and resources to expand student success across Illinois



Illinois Education and Career Success Network launched with ISAC, Advance Illinois, and the Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University to support communities to increase meaningful and equitable postsecondary attainment



Illinois College Access Network (Illinois CAN): a network focused on improving postsecondary access and success for low-income and first-generation college students in Illinois. ISAC took over leadership of the organization in late 2021.

ISAC Financial Aid and Related Programs

Scholarship, Grant, and Waiver Programs

- Monetary Award Program (MAP)
- Illinois National Guard (ING) Grant Program
- Illinois Veteran Grant (IVG) Program
- Grant Program for Dependents of Police, Fire, and Correctional Officers
- Grant Program for Exonerees
- AIM HIGH Grant Pilot Program
- Minority Teachers of Illinois (MTI) Scholarship Program
- Special Education Teacher Tuition Waiver (SETTW) Program
- Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) Scholarship Program
- Post-MSW School Social Work Professional Educator License Scholarship
- Nursing Education Scholarship Program
- Optometric Education Scholarship Program
- Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Transition Scholarship Program
- Higher Education License Plate (HELP) Program
- Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois Program (Recipients selected by the Golden Apple Foundation)
- Golden Apple Accelerators Program (Recipients selected by the Golden Apple Foundation)

Loan Repayment Assistance

- Community Behavioral Health Care Professional Loan Repayment Program
- Nurse Educator Loan Repayment Program
- Illinois Teachers Loan Repayment Program
- Veterans Home Medical Providers Loan Repayment Program
- John R. Justice Student Loan Repayment Program (for public interest attorneys)
- School and Municipal Social Work Shortage Loan Repayment Program



Development and administration of the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid

Illinois State Scholar Program



College Illinois® Prepaid Tuition Program (program closed to new enrollments)

ISAC Research and Data

Annual Databook with detailed information on ISAC college access/financial aid programs

College Access/ Financial Aid Reports and Analysis: selected topics

Surveys and data review on ISAC and other programs

ISAC's depth of experience and statewide capacity in college access services are unmatched by any other outreach provider in Illinois. Our outreach programs are informed and supported by a breadth of financial aid programs, educational research, and capacity-building – expertise developed through more than half a century of experience – and by our deep commitment to serving a range of constituents and partners.








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