

**AGENDA ITEM 7.**

**COLLEGE ACCESS AND OUTREACH UPDATE**

**Submitted for:** Information

**Summary:** The following is an update on college awareness and preparation activities that have taken place or that are in progress for the 2011-12 academic year. Included in this report are: Financial Aid Awareness Month; The College Planning Act; and “When I Grow Up” - Early College Awareness.

**Action requested:** None

**ILLINOIS STUDENT ASSISTANCE COMMISSION  
COLLEGE ACCESS AND OUTREACH UPDATE**

**FINANCIAL AID AWARENESS MONTH**

The end of March marks the completion of one of the busiest outreach cycles for the Illinois Student Assistance Corps (ISACorps) each year. From January 1st through March 15th, the ISACorps is primarily engaged in Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) awareness and completion activities. Not only is FAFSA completion a key performance indicator for the Federal College Access Challenge Grant Program (CACG), through which the ISACorps is funded, it is the application for the Illinois Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant. The MAP Grant combined with the Federal Pell Grant provides potential first generation college students - who are typically both low-income and underrepresented in postsecondary education - with a powerful tool to overcome the financial barriers of entering and persisting in college.

The month of February is historically designated Financial Aid Awareness Month (FAAM). During this month hundreds of FAFSA completion workshops are held throughout the state. The goal of these workshops is to assist eligible students and their parents with the accurate completion of a FAFSA as early as possible in order to maximize the financial aid eligibility of a student. For anyone, but particularly for families without prior college-going experience, completing the FAFSA can be very intimidating. Delaying or forgoing the completion of this single application for all Federal, most State, and some private aid has a substantial impact on a student's ability to enroll and persist in a quality postsecondary credential program. Conservative estimates indicate that a college-bound student is 50% more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school if they complete a FAFSA.

From January 1, 2012 through March 16, 2012 ISAC staff conducted 651 FAFSA completion workshops with just under 10,000 people in attendance. Workshops were conducted in every area of Illinois including all state Senate districts and all but 14 of the House districts. The largest single event was attended by 220 people.

The results of increased FAFSA awareness have been dramatic. As of March 14<sup>th</sup>, more than 342,000 2012-13 FAFSAs had been filed by Illinois students. As a result, award announcements for the Illinois Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grant had to be suspended at the earliest point in program history. In other words, more MAP-eligible students applied earlier than ever before. This means that more students will be aware of their financial options sooner, and will have better information to assist them in selecting a college and planning for the future – including decisions about student loans and debt management.

**THE COLLEGE PLANNING ACT**

In August, the passage of The College Planning Act - Public Act 97-289 - established an ISAC - administered early college planning program through which students from families without prior college going experience or who are eligible to participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program can receive ongoing structured college planning assistance beginning in 8th grade and continuing through and including postsecondary enrollment. The legislation designates ISAC's near peer Corps members as those providing direct student service through the program.

This April, we will begin recruiting our first program participants as they prepare to make the transition from 8th grade to 9th grade. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicates that there were 155,003 8th grade students in public schools in Illinois. Approximately 43% were eligible to participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program.

## **WHEN I GROW UP - EARLIER COLLEGE AWARENESS**

According to numerous studies, including those by both the National Research Council and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reading proficiency at the end of third grade is a strong indicator of high school graduation. Furthermore, the correlation between household income and reading level, and parental education and household income leads us to this stark reality: by the time many students first encounter college awareness programs, whether that be in 12th grade, 11th grade, or even as early as 8th grade, it is statistically too late. Their academic ability to participate in, and therefore financially benefit from, need-based grant programs has already been hampered by the very same economic conditions which determine their financial aid eligibility. With this in mind, outreach staff devote a portion of their time to trying to reach very young students and their parents.

An earlier college awareness program which we piloted in spring 2011, and again this winter, is simply called When I Grow Up, and designed for children in preschool through third grade. This winter approximately 200 students participated in the second pilot. Following are excerpts from a news story about the program:

“ROCK FALLS – The second-graders at Dillon Elementary School have toured three universities. Well, maybe they didn’t visit them in person, but they made Flat Stanleys – two-dimensional versions of themselves – that sat in libraries, stood next to footballs, visited classrooms or toured campuses on undergraduate students’ backpacks. The project was part of the “When I Grow Up” program. Illinois Student Assistance Commission sponsors the program that tries to pique children’s interest in college while they’re still very young.

All of the school’s second-graders, about 115 students, participated...In January, the students pasted photos of themselves onto Flat Stanleys that were mailed to Augustana College, Western Illinois University and Illinois State University. The students received photos of their future selves enjoying college life. In February, the students filled out forms that asked them what they want to do when they grow up. Their teachers and parents also were given the forms and weighed in on what professions they thought would suit the students.

Zoie Howard, 7, of Rock Falls, blew past the requirement of three career ideas. She decided that she wanted to be a veterinarian, an art teacher, a teacher of core curriculum or a drummer or lead singer in a band. “It was awesome!” she said of the program...

Friday, the students had a graduation from the program and a “welcome home” party for the Flat Stanleys...The students received letters from their Flat Stanleys that touted college as a fun experience and emphasized that math, science and reading are important skills to have before attending college. Principal Brody Rude said it was a good experience for the students. “It broadens their horizons,” he said. “It opens up their eyes.” (complete text available at:

[saukvalley.com/2012/03/12/students-get-taste-of-college-life/a5m6smw/?page=1](http://saukvalley.com/2012/03/12/students-get-taste-of-college-life/a5m6smw/?page=1)).

The goal of earlier awareness initiative such as this is to engage young children, their families and their teachers in the discussion of college as a real possibility for all students, regardless of income or other socio-economic factors. Increasing aspiration and helping to develop short-term goals on the long path to college are very simple strategies to help bring valuable information resources to families without prior college-going experience.

## **ILLINOIS STUDENT ASSISTANCE CORPS OVERVIEW AND HIGHLIGHTS**

Created in 2009, the ISACorps is an 87 member group of recent college graduates employed by ISAC to act as near-peer mentors to high school-aged students – and younger – as they prepare to make academic, college, and career choices. The ultimate goal of the mentors and the program is to help students and their families make the most well-informed decisions possible about postsecondary paths and requisite preparation. Through early intervention with unbiased, accurate and comprehensive information about college and career preparation, it is expected that students will make choices that result in greater success, better return on investment, and increased economic productivity and stability for the student, the community, and the state.

The Corps is a community-based grass roots outreach program, the guiding principles and practices of which have been based on the diffusion model of innovation. Use of the diffusion model, which can be most often observed in public health campaigns, requires a high-level of homogeneity between the mentor and mentee. As such, every effort is made to recruit Corps members who are first generation college students from Illinois and from the community in which they will serve. Corps members spend 50% of their time working in the highest need high schools in their district and 50% of their time in other community-based organizations and locations. This division of efforts is constructed primarily to better reach students who, because they do not consider themselves college-bound, consistently resist college planning services and messaging within a school setting. In addition, a community-wide effort also reaches the adults who support the students within the target audience as well as those adults who are themselves in need of college and career planning assistance.

The program, only in its third year, is already emerging as a national model. The United States Department of Education has highlighted the success of ISAC's CACG project in meeting a key performance indicator of the program: increasing FAFSA completion by low-income, underrepresented, and first generation college students. In addition, ISAC has provided consulting services and technical assistance to several other states that are developing outreach and/or mentoring models. Just this past year, ISAC staff traveled to Tennessee and Mississippi to assist with training and development for new CACG-funded outreach programs.

During the 2010-11 school year, Corps members reached 156,000 people, provided one-on-one assistance to almost 12,000 students, and had on-going mentoring relationships with almost 8000 students.

We are currently recruiting our fourth cohort of ISACorps near-peer mentors. For more information or to refer potential candidates, please contact:

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