

# COLLEGE ACCESS AND OUTREACH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING



To ensure that Illinois develops a workforce that is prepared for the jobs of the future, the state has established a goal that 60% of Illinois adults will have a postsecondary degree or high quality credential by 2025. The Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) serves aspiring students in two key areas to help reach that goal, providing **money** and **knowledge**. These supports are particularly essential to address the obstacles facing low income students and those whose families lack experience with college. Supporting our students and families will mean a brighter future for them, and for our state.

### **ISAC's outreach, capacity development and training efforts include four primary components:**

- Direct assistance to students and families through college readiness activities and supports for families navigating the college planning and financial aid process, offered statewide by the Illinois Student Assistance Corps (ISACorps).
- Free online resources, information and tools to help students and families make informed decisions about education after high school and financial aid.
- Professional development for financial aid administrators, teachers and high school counselors on postsecondary access and financial aid.
- Partnerships with community organizations, non-profits, sister agencies and others to increase the ability of partners and communities to support students' postsecondary and career exploration, preparation, and attainment.

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## DIRECT ASSISTANCE TO FAMILIES: THE ISACORPS

A key component of ISAC's outreach efforts is the ISACorps. The ISACorps is a talented group of recent college graduates who are trained to serve as near peer mentors to high school students, helping students and their families navigate the process of applying to and entering college.

While the services of the ISACorps are available to anyone in Illinois, ISACorps members focus their efforts on working with students who are low income and those whose families have no prior college-going experience. As a way to equitably serve the entire state, each ISACorps member is assigned to a community college district in Illinois, although they are not affiliated with the community college system. ISACorps members have a goal to spend approximately half of their time working in the highest need high schools in their district and half of their time in other community-based organizations and locations. In order to better connect with students, every effort is made to recruit ISACorps members who are first generation college students and who come from, or went to school in the Illinois community to which they will be assigned.

As part of their outreach efforts, ISACorps members partner with local schools, businesses, and nonprofit organizations in order to deliver free career and college planning and preparation services. 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, the Rock the FAFSA campaign in the Spring, and throughout the year. The ISACorps have also been instrumental in supporting schools in implementing the state's FAFSA Mandate, which requires public high school seniors to complete a financial aid application as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma.



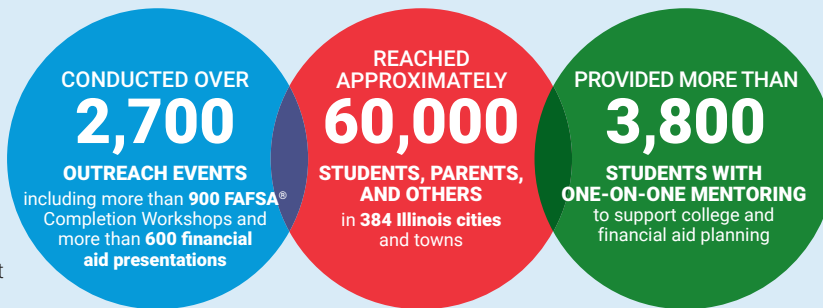
A group of ISACorps members also serve as mentors for the ISAC First Generation Scholars Network, supporting students who will be the first in their families to earn a college degree. The Network provides events and programs that offer students tools, resources, mentoring, and a great network of connections to make their transition to and first year of college a easier and more successful.



The ISACorps also staff the Illinois GEAR UP program, administered by ISAC under a federal seven-year Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs grant. The federal GEAR UP program provides competitive matching grants to states and partnerships working with high-need middle and high schools to provide early intervention that will improve college attendance and success and raise the expectations of low income students. The ISACorps provide direct services to students in 17 high-need middle schools and 16 high schools in rural and other areas of the state that do not have as much access to college readiness programs and supports as those in more highly populated urban areas.

### The ISACorps: By the Numbers FY2022

ISAC's Call Center assists students and families by email, chat, and phone with questions about college and financial aid, student loans and repayment.



*"I was surprised at the ease of completing the FAFSA and I was grateful for the help I received from the ISAC staff. The knowledge they shared was empowering."*

**GLENBARD EAST PARENT IMELDA GUTIERREZ**, after attending a FAFSA Completion Workshop supported by ISAC at her daughter's high school

*"The ISACorps has been a valuable asset to Evanston Township High School. With over 40% of our students receiving free or reduced lunch, our students, parents and community partners have benefited from having dedicated financial aid assistance services in our building. With the assistance of the Corps, we have been fortunate to be able to add to our financial aid programming and free up time for our counselors to focus on other aspects of the post-secondary process."*

**BETH A. AREY**

College & Career Coordinator | Chair, College Board Midwestern Regional Council | Evanston Township High School, Evanston, IL

To find your local ISACorps member, visit [studentportal.isac.org/isacorps](http://studentportal.isac.org/isacorps)

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## CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

ISAC's Capacity Development and Training Division helps partners and communities increase their ability to support students' postsecondary and career exploration, preparation, and attainment by intentionally building awareness, collaboration, and opportunities at the local level. The team helps leverage existing resources to produce more impactful results through sustainable initiatives, fostering partnerships, and connecting state policy efforts to local needs and initiatives. Training and professional development for school counselors and other college access practitioners helps ensure students and families receive accurate and reliable information about the postsecondary planning and financial aid process.

### Partnerships

#### College Changes Everything® Promotes Awareness/Builds Partnerships

##### COLLEGE CHANGES EVERYTHING

ISAC launched College Changes Everything® over a decade ago as a college access movement focused on developing a coalition of partners both within the state and nationally to promote awareness of the impact of a college education on individuals and community.

Every year, the College Changes Everything Conference draws a capacity crowd of Illinois education, government and non-profit leaders, focused on working together and learning from each other to address challenges and identify solutions in helping Illinoisans get to college and graduate.



#### College Changes Everything® Month and fall campaign

2022 marked the eighth "College Changes Everything Month" (CCE Month) in October, when ISAC and partners assist students who are completing both college applications and financial aid forms at the same time. ISAC and its partners have extended the month-long campaign to provide an intensive schedule of free college and financial aid planning support to students and families from Labor Day through Thanksgiving.

#### CCE Fall Campaign: By the Numbers

From Labor Day through Thanksgiving 2022, ISAC and/or its partners statewide conducted

- More than 1,700 Outreach events attended by over 38,000 students and families, including:
  - More than 1,100 financial aid completion workshops and financial aid presentations
  - Almost 170 college application workshops as part of the American College Application Campaign
  - with schools and organizations in 349 cities and towns

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CITIES & TOWNS

#### ISAC Data-Sharing Initiative Helps Improve FAFSA Completion

Among ISAC's proudest accomplishments is the success of its efforts to increase the number of students who file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®), or, if eligible, the Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid. The FAFSA is the key to federal, state, and often institutional aid—which means that for some students, it can also be the key to attending college. (The Alternative Application provides a pathway to state financial aid for eligible undocumented students and transgender students who prefer not to apply for federal student aid.) Delivered in partnership with high schools, colleges, and community organizations, ISAC's FAFSA completion efforts include partner training on the FAFSA and how to file it; direct assistance to students and parents in filing the FAFSA; and a data-sharing program that allows schools to focus their limited resources on helping students who have not yet filed the application.

This package of ISAC initiatives has been the foundation for significant strides in FAFSA completion in Illinois, resulting in so much improvement that the U.S. Department of Education launched a nationwide program based on the Illinois model for schools around the country.

This initiative has been even more important since the launch of the state's FAFSA Mandate in fall 2020, which requires public high school seniors to complete a financial aid application as a prerequisite to receiving a high school diploma.

The FAFSA completion efforts of ISAC and partners statewide have been so successful that Illinois continues to rank among the top states for the highest percent of FAFSAs completed by high school seniors according to the National College Access Network's FAFSA Tracker.

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## Professional Development

ISAC offers a host of professional development opportunities for financial aid administrators, high school guidance counselors, and other partners on a variety of topics, including its formalized annual certification series that gives professionals a detailed understanding of financial aid programs and systems. Sessions take place each fall, winter, and spring and are offered at no cost to counselors, mentors, and members of the general public. ISAC offers virtual and in-person professional development.



ISAC is leading the professional training for Illinois PaCE, providing materials and leadership workshops. The Illinois Postsecondary and Career Expectations (PaCE) framework was developed with extensive input gathered from stakeholders and subject matter experts to provide guidance to students, families, and educators on what types of experiences and information a student should have in order to make the most informed decision about college and career planning beginning in 8th grade and through high school. The PaCE Framework is intended to be used as an organizing tool to help schools, districts and communities work together to better prepare students for life after high school.

ISAC's professional development staff also supports Illinoisans with training on state and federal programs. For example, In FY 22, ISAC began offering free webinars to help ensure that student loan borrowers who might be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness could take advantage of the program and the short-term Limited Waiver offered by the U.S. Department of Education.

### Professional Development: By the Numbers FY2022



## ISAC STUDENT PORTAL: COLLEGE PLANNING MADE EASY



ISAC's award-winning Student Portal offers free college planning, financial aid and money management tools and resources to help students and families make smart college and money choices. Partner resources include Cappex for college and scholarship search; the Claim Your Future® game to explore education and training after high school, future careers, and money management; and Illinois workNet® for career and job search. In addition, the Portal offers free online tools and calculators to keep track of

college planning and admissions deadlines, help calculate potential financial aid, and compare financial aid awards. Students will also find a Summer Internship/Job Board with over 2,000 regularly updated job postings. The Now Playing section of the Portal offers videos providing quick tips and important information on college planning and financial aid, including more than 25 ISAC College Minute™ videos in English and Spanish. Students can also use the Portal to find their local ISACorps member for one-on-one assistance, and to find college planning and financial aid events.



## ISAC COLLEGE Q&A: COLLEGE PLANNING ANSWERS ON-THE-GO

ISAC College Q&A is a free text messaging service that allows students to text questions to ISAC college planning professionals about the college-going and financial aid process and get answers sent directly to their phones. With more than 11,000 subscribers since it launched in early 2016, the service also sends students alerts and reminders about important deadlines, and information about college access and financial aid events in their area.

Visit the ISAC Student Portal at [studentportal.isac.org](http://studentportal.isac.org)

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