

The Associated Colleges of Illinois

A History 2002-2012

**Chapter Six: Collaborative Problem-
Solving for the New Millennium**



Collaborative Problem-Solving for the New Millennium

ACI's 50th anniversary celebration, *Liberal Arts for Leadership* (2001-2002), provided a high-profile "coming out" party for the Associated Colleges of Illinois. This initiative effectively raised visibility for ACI, and it called attention to ACI's capacity to successfully broaden its agenda beyond collaborative *fundraising* to encompass collaborative *problem-solving*. And while significant disruptions to business and philanthropy occurred in the aftermath of the 9-11 terror attacks, as ACI's 50th anniversary celebration and 2002 came to a close, the Associated Colleges of Illinois had begun building new relationships with many influential public and private funders. By 2003, at the beginning of its sixth decade, ACI was well positioned to take a leadership role in addressing some of society's most challenging education and workforce issues.

Teacher Quality as a Higher Education Imperative

Of all the problems facing education early in the new millennium, the widening achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers stood as the most compelling – in Illinois and across the nation. Research had demonstrated that good teaching can be a more powerful influence on student learning than ethnicity or family income, the specific school a child attends, or

the size of classes in that school. Moreover, although effective teachers had been shown to benefit all students, poor and/or minority students actually benefited more than did their more affluent and/or white peers. Educators and policymakers concluded that achieving positive change in high-need classrooms depended on preparing and retaining high quality teachers. As a result, expectations rose that higher education would undertake greater responsibility for improving results in K-12 classrooms.

Already, Illinois was facing a real crisis in K-12 education: The state's public schools were serving 850,000 (41%) low-income students. These students were falling behind on standardized tests, in grade-level achievement, and in rates of high school graduation. Further, low-income students were disproportionately taught by teachers who were unlicensed, inexperienced, or teaching subjects for which they were not endorsed.

In fall 2002, Illinois public schools opened with nearly 2,200 vacant teaching positions, and educators and policymakers alike anticipated an ever worsening teacher shortage. Only about half of all new teachers remained in the classroom more than five years, and 16 percent of all Illinois teachers were expected to be eligible for retirement by 2004. Finally, most teacher education programs were operating at capacity and could not accommodate significant new demand. As a result, experts predicted that by 2010, experienced teachers would be leaving the profession faster than they could be replaced.

Forestalling a shortage of highly trained teachers became so great a concern that in early 2003, Illinois' newly elected governor identified this challenge as one of the state's most compelling issues, and he advocated for special scholarships for teacher candidates intending to work in high-need schools. The Associated Colleges of Illinois and its member institutions were ready to respond.

Harnessing Talent for Illinois' Neediest Classrooms

Potential shortages of high-quality K-12 teachers had been on ACI's agenda since 2000, when it convened ACI's *Teacher Education and Certification Task*

Force. This group of deans and directors of education programs from nearly all ACI member institutions jumped head first into the morass of state regulation and contrasting pedagogical approaches, set aside parochial concerns, and sought out collaborative strategies to graduate more teachers prepared specifically for high-need schools. Ultimately, they concluded that the most effective way to expand the capacity of teacher preparation programs was through accelerated pathways: innovative programs that leverage the skills and experience of college-educated adults to help them launch second careers in teaching. Similar efforts – known as *Transition to Teaching Programs* – already had earned the support of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), which began awarding \$35-\$45 million annually in Transition to Teaching grants in 2001.

In 2003, at its 51st Annual Public Forum, *Teachers Lead, Leaders Teach*, the Associated Colleges of Illinois announced that it had secured what was then the state’s largest federal Transition to Teaching grant – \$2.2 million.

Whereas, the Associated Colleges of Illinois represents a statewide network of private liberal arts institutions with a historic commitment to superior teacher education programs, and...

Whereas, the Associated Colleges of Illinois has received a \$2.2 million federal...Transition to Teaching grant...to bring more highly-qualified teachers into classrooms in high-need districts...

Now, therefore, [Illinois] declares the week of March 24-28, 2003 to be Teachers Lead, Leaders Teach Week.

Governor’s Proclamation, State of Illinois, 2003

At that time, ACI members already were growing their teacher education programs faster than all other Illinois colleges and universities combined. Alumni of ACI teacher education programs were beginning and maintaining teaching careers at higher rates than graduates of other institutions, and their excellent reputation made them desirable candidates to fill vacancies in local school

districts. ACI's new *Transition to Teaching Program* leveraged this sterling track record to create Illinois' only comprehensive, statewide initiative addressing the teacher shortage.

Built on wide-ranging partnerships among ACI members, the business community, public school districts, and interested not-for-profits, ACI's *Transition to Teaching Program* was designed not only to rapidly and effectively transition mid-career college graduates to teaching careers, but also to encourage more new teachers, especially minorities, to choose careers in high-need districts, and to provide these new teachers with mentoring and other supports that could improve their effectiveness and help keep them in the profession longer.

“[ACI is] the natural choice for a statewide *Transition to Teaching Program* – both because we have an outstanding track record in teacher education and because, with members located throughout the state, we are perfectly positioned to establish hands-on partnership with Illinois’ high-need school districts.”

**Gary Jewell, (former) Executive Director, Institute for Collaboration,
Aurora University**

Aurora University (Aurora, IL) established ACI's first *Transition to Teaching* partnership with Aurora East and West Aurora School Districts. To launch the initiative, in February 2003, Aurora University hosted a recruitment fair to attract college-educated adults – including the many victims of corporate downsizing then rampant across the economy – to new careers teaching in high-need schools. School district recruiters and university faculty were stunned when more than 250 prospects descended on this event, where they waited hours to interview for the few dozen openings in ACI's first *Transition to Teaching* cohort. Ultimately, eight ACI member colleges and universities participated in *Transition to Teaching* partnerships. By 2009, when the federal grant concluded, an estimated 216 career-changers had been certified through these partnerships and were teaching in high-need classrooms across Illinois.

From Transition to Teaching to Success in High-Need Schools

The *Transition to Teaching* grant was only the first in a series of major federal awards ACI secured over the next four years. Subsequent federal grants included: *Teacher Quality Enhancement-Partnership Program*, funding partnerships between higher education and high-need K-12 schools, transformation of teacher education curricula to better prepare teachers for high-poverty schools, and activities to support new teachers beginning careers in high-need classrooms; *Teacher Quality Enhancement-Recruitment Program*, funding ACI's *Diversity at the Blackboard* initiative to recruit more men and minorities to teach in high-need schools; and *Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE)*, funding ACI's *Illinois Special Education Collaborative (ISPED)*, which developed teacher preparation programs meeting new state requirements for certifying special education teachers. Each of these initiatives was collaborative by design and sparked successful partnerships among ACI institutions and between those institutions and K-12 schools throughout Illinois.

“[Establishing ACI’s Center for Success in High-Need Schools] represents a significant landmark for the Associated Colleges of Illinois... for our partner school districts, businesses, and funders, and most of all – for thousands of children and youth struggling to learn in schools where most students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and where the challenges are so extreme that the majority of new teachers hired for these schools leave the profession within five years....ACI offers new hope both to the dedicated teachers looking for answers and to the students struggling to make the grade.”

Richard F. Giese, (former) President, Monmouth College

Further, federally-funded programs did not remain isolated silos on the ACI landscape: In 2004, the Associated Colleges of Illinois brought its federal funding together with grants from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Chicago Community Trust, Foundation for Independent Higher Education, Griswold Foundation, State Farm Companies, and other public and private sources to

establish ACI's Center for Success in High-Need Schools. This multi-million dollar, statewide enterprise was dedicated to closing the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers by providing a key ingredient for success: excellent and diverse teachers prepared for the specific challenges of high-need schools.

Beginning in 2004, ACI's *Center* sought to: 1) build a larger and more diverse teacher corps that could relieve teacher shortages in high-need schools and that would more closely mirror the demographics of Illinois students; 2) increase the substantive expertise teachers bring to their students in core subjects, such as math, science, and reading; 3) develop model curricula that provide real-world clinical experiences and enhance teacher candidates' understanding of socioeconomic issues that impact learning and of pedagogies that help close the achievement gap; 4) cultivate teachers' long-term commitments to high-need classrooms through professional development that strengthens key areas of professional practice; 5) disseminate new knowledge on improving teaching and learning in high-need schools.

The federal grant programs, aimed at transforming the way in which new teachers would be prepared and ensuring a more diverse population of teacher candidates, provided the Center's core, but its goals inspired a broader portfolio of activities, including:

- ACI's *Teacher Induction Academies (TIA)*, free professional development sessions providing a safe, supportive community for new teachers from metro Chicago and East St. Louis through their first critical years in high-poverty schools. *TIA* helped new teachers acquire knowledge of a wide range of topics from classroom management and documenting and communicating student progress to understanding the culture of poverty. Originally designed for teacher-candidates and first- through third-year teachers, by 2007, *TIA* had added tracks for fourth- and fifth-year teachers, as well as a summer retreat for new teachers, mentors, principals, and teacher preparation faculty.
- A comprehensive *Center* website, which provided detailed information about the grant-funded programs and showcased work-in-progress at participating

campuses. The website received more than 30,000 visits annually.

- *Mentor Online*, a web-based support system with blogs addressing both content and pedagogy. Online mentors posted lesson plans and answered questions from new teachers on *Mentor Online*, attracting visits from an average of 600 registered users each month.
- An online journal, *Success in High-Need Schools*, which has disseminated the *Center's* "lessons learned" throughout its lifetime. The 12 issues of *Success in High-Need Schools* featured more than 100 articles on recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers in high-need schools – providing publication opportunities not only for academics and policy-makers, but also for practicing classroom teachers. *Success in High-Need Schools* generated a significant audience, with more than 8,500 visits to the journal site recorded during the 2007-08 year alone. *ACI's Journal for Success in High-Need Schools* remained accessible as late as 2014 through ACI's website, www.acifund.org.
- A monthly newsletter, *Center Connections*, which maintained communications among the hundreds of individuals participating in *Center* partnerships. ACI published more than 30 issues of this publication which featured progress reports of partner programs and kept partners informed of key deadlines, administrative processes, and new opportunities for funding.
- Three *Center Symposia*, which featured nationally-known experts addressing critical issues facing high-need schools. Audience members included more than 400 educators from across the spectrum from pre-kindergarten to college, together with business and community leaders.

Center partnerships were sustained and institutionalized, in part, by monthly *Center Partnership Meetings*, where representatives of colleges and universities, schools and school districts, government agencies, and not-for-profits interested in teaching and learning met monthly to share experiences and data, plan and assess activities, and learn together about emerging trends in teacher preparation and K-12 education. These *Center Partnership Meetings* continued to draw significant and enthusiastic attendance for more than a decade –

promoting a shared vision of what defines teacher quality and a shared sense of responsibility for improving student achievement.

In addition, in connection with its *Center for Success in High-Need Schools*, ACI established its *Education Council*, to bring the wisdom of the business, not-for-profit, and policy sectors to the *Center's* work. *Education Council* members included State Farm Insurance Company, the Chicago Community Trust, Illinois State Board of Education, Chicago Public Schools, Illinois Math and Science Academy, and other influential organizations. Its first chairman was Axel D. Steuer, president of Illinois College, followed, in 2009, by Steven Timmermans, president of Trinity Christian College.

By 2009, when ACI's *Center for Success in High Needs Schools* celebrated its fifth anniversary and the conclusion of the first of its federal grants, it had attracted \$17 million in public and private funding to education reform in Illinois, convened 17 member colleges and universities in authentic partnerships with 38 high-need Illinois school districts and 106 high-poverty Pre-K-12 schools, engaged more than 8,500 teacher candidates, teachers, school leaders, and faculty, and touched the lives of more than 77,000 children.

ACI colleges and universities had increased the number of candidates they certified by more than 110 percent, accounting for more than 27 percent of all teachers certified in Illinois. The majority of these new teachers (55 percent) were taking jobs in high-poverty, hard-to-staff schools – up from 35 percent in 2002. One hundred percent of these teachers were considered highly qualified by regulatory definition; 100 percent of them had passed the Illinois certification exam, and more than 98 percent passed relevant subject matter competency tests. While teachers graduating from non-ACI institutions averaged teaching careers of three years, many teachers educated at ACI institutions were still in high-need classrooms after seven years, and these teachers credited ACI's *Center for Success* programs for giving them the confidence to succeed in high-need classrooms. *Center* programs also positively influenced K-12

schools participating in its partnerships: Nine ACI colleges and universities had so significant an impact on their partner K-12 schools that these schools were granted “spotlight school status” by the Illinois State Board of Education.

“Teacher educators can be powerful agents of change and not merely passive residents of an ivory tower. Teacher preparation programs can and should be vehicles of progress that respond to real-world needs and that actively seek solutions to our toughest education challenge.... Higher education is not only a place where great minds think great thoughts, generate scholarship, and engage in profound dialogue. It is also a place that cultivates critical action to inform public policy and drive institutional change.”

Janis C. Fitzsimmons, Director, ACI's *Center for Success in High-Need Schools*, Executive Director, Center for Urban Education, North Central College

The accomplishments of ACI's *Center for Success in High-Need Schools* were more than a numbers game. ACI's *Center* changed member teacher preparation programs in fundamental ways: 1) by expanding the capacity of ACI institutions to produce new, highly qualified teachers; 2) by building partnerships that bridged the gap between higher education and Pre-K-12 education; 3) by advancing systemic and sustainable reforms to teacher preparation, including offering new coursework and intensive clinical experiences focused on high-need populations and schools, and cultivating collaborations among teacher educators and arts and sciences faculty aimed at boosting teachers' content knowledge; and 4) by keeping talented teachers in the classroom, particularly in under-resourced schools, where the cost of attrition can be overwhelming.

Toward the end of the *Center's* first five years, in 2009, the environment in which it operated began to change – politically and economically. In Washington, DC, the new Administration retired the *Transition to Teaching and Teacher Quality Enhancement* programs and refocused on STEM studies (science, technology, engineering, and math); early childhood education; and college efficiency,

affordability, and completion. At the same time, the Great Recession of 2008 took hold across the nation, with economic recovery occurring only incrementally as late as 2012. The anticipated teacher shortage failed to materialize because, in a recessionary economy, many older teachers delayed retirement, and many school districts implemented austerity measures that resulted in larger class sizes, smaller workforces, and fewer teacher vacancies. As a result, as the Center's major grants began to sunset, fewer public or private dollars were available to sustain its initiatives. Nonetheless, the *Center's* work continued – both because, at that time, a teacher shortage was seen as inevitable, and because ACI's *Center* partnerships and programs had become a permanent part of the fabric of the participating institutions. In light of the ongoing commitment of ACI teacher educators and their district partners, ACI continued to seek and secure funding for a variety of projects that reflected changing priorities and policies addressing improving teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms.

Still vibrant and relevant in 2011, ACI's *Center for Success in High-Need Schools* continued to address critical education reforms that ACI member colleges and universities can advance by recruiting, preparing, and retaining excellent teachers for high-need schools. These reforms included: setting higher standards for teacher preparation and licensure; making recruitment and admission to teacher preparation programs more selective; including rigorous clinical practice in those programs; and undertaking increased accountability for preparing effective teachers for all classrooms.

Fundamental to all ACI's *Center's* work in the 2010s was integrating the Common Core State Standards (guidelines for what students were expected to learn, from kindergarten through 12th grade) into teacher preparation, professional development, and classroom teaching. Through collaborations among ACI members Dominican University, Eureka College, Illinois College, McKendree University, North Central College, and University of St. Francis, ACI's *Center* launched *both* professional development for middle grade and high school math teachers adopting the Common Core, as well as efforts to integrate the Common Core across the continuum of teacher preparation, from teacher educators to preservice candidates to K-12 teachers.

“ACI colleges and universities have that rare combination of social conscience and entrepreneurial spirit required to fundamentally change the way teacher preparation programs do business.”

Mike Portland, (former) Chairman, The Associated Colleges of Illinois

The accomplishments of ACI's *Center for Success in High-Need Schools* made a compelling and coherent case for the positive impact ACI colleges and universities can have on public education in Illinois – and across the nation. The *Center's Progress Briefing*, published in 2008, observed: “When authentic partnerships between higher education and Pre-K-12 schools bridge the gap between educational theory and classroom practice, they can produce scalable, sustainable solutions that meet the challenges of high-need schools. Further, teacher candidates who gain hands-on experience in high-need schools, and who study the history, sociology, and psychology of high-need communities are more willing (and more competent) to teach in these communities. These teachers can effect real progress toward closing the achievement gap and advancing educational equity.”

ACI's College Readiness Program Comes of Age

In 2004, the young men and women who joined ACI's *College Readiness Program* as high school freshmen in 1996 began graduating from college. This event signaled the growing maturity of the Associated Colleges of Illinois' problem-solving programs, which had debuted with *College Readiness* eight years earlier.

“College Readiness is about human potential – unlocked when young people realize that a college education is within their grasp and that higher education opens the door to worlds they never imagined.”

James M. Dennis, President, McKendree University

In celebrating this landmark, ACI took stock of its *College Readiness* partnership. In 2004, that partnership extended to 76 high schools, 36 youth service agencies, and all 24 colleges and universities then members of ACI. At that juncture, the program served more than 600 students in Chicago, East St. Louis, and Central Illinois. Then, and for the next six years, ACI recruited participants from youth-serving agencies, and these students participated in what became known as “traditional” *College Readiness*: monthly full-day Saturday seminars for academic and personal enrichment, together with a week-long *Summer Academy* that provided real-world college experience on an ACI member campus.

By 2011, ACI’s *College Readiness Program* had touched the lives of more than 2,000 Illinois high school students, and data showed that program participants evidenced consistently high high school graduation and college enrollment rates: On average, 99 percent of participants finished high school, and 95 percent enrolled in college immediately thereafter. Typically, only 36 percent of graduates from participating high schools attended four-year colleges, compared to almost 70 percent of ACI’s *College Readiness* graduates. In 2011, 90 percent of *College Readiness* graduates enrolled in college – 67 percent in four-year colleges and 24 percent in two-year colleges.

“ACI’s *College Readiness Program* realizes the potential of [Trinity Christian College’s] liberal arts tradition to connect with the future as well as the past and rewards us for our investment with a pool of perspective students who will shape that future.”

Steven Timmermans, President, Trinity Christian College

However, as early as 2008, ACI had begun to reassess its *College Readiness* activities. In 1996, ACI’s program had been one of Illinois’ very first college readiness efforts. By 2008, there were dozens of programs sponsored by youth service agencies, faith-based organizations, and high schools. Many were providing services comparable to those ACI offered during its Saturday seminars, and because most had daily or near-daily contact with enrolled

students, they could sustain more intrusive and effective interactions. At the same time, the need for improving students' math and science knowledge and interest had become increasingly urgent, and ACI began to explore how it might accomplish more intensive academic enrichment targeting STEM studies.

This program review resulted in the creation of ACI's *Intensive Science and Math Experience*, or *ISME*, in 2009. This new approach to ACI's Saturday *College Readiness* seminars was built on hands-on laboratory experiences that helped participants explore STEM careers and boost their knowledge and confidence in STEM content, while at the same time acquiring the college access/readiness information long part of the ACI curriculum. At the same time, ACI tightened participation guidelines and reduced the total number of students, in an effort to ensure that those students enrolled in the program received sufficient contact to maximize impact.

Data from 2011 documented continued positive outcomes from ACI's *College Readiness Program*: 100 percent of the *College Readiness Class* of 2011 graduated from high school; 90.5 percent enrolled in college that fall, and two-thirds of those college-bound students chose four-year colleges – a rate significantly higher than for other students from Chicago Public Schools. Thus, after 15 years, the Associated Colleges of Illinois remained a leader in advancing college readiness for Illinois' low-income, minority, and first-generation students.

After College Readiness Comes College Completion

By 2006, the Associated Colleges of Illinois had 10 years of experience with college readiness under its belt and had emerged as one of Illinois' most expert college readiness providers. But after helping hundreds of at-risk students realize the dream of graduating from high school and pursuing post-secondary education, ACI had become convinced that college readiness services alone were not sufficient. Too many at-risk students with sufficient talent and funding to make a "go" of higher education were giving up on their college dreams without earning a degree. In fact, a 2006 study from the Consortium on Chicago School

Research showed that only slightly more than one-third of Chicago Public School graduates who enrolled in college had completed a degree within six years.

To equip low-income, minority, and first generation students to successfully travel the road from college admission to degree completion, ACI believed that new supports would be required to effectively nurture at-risk students once they arrived on college campuses. And although at the time, few other college readiness providers or funders were even discussing college completion rates for low-income, minority, and first generation students, the Associated Colleges of Illinois was determined to lead the way toward improved graduation rates for this vulnerable population.

To that end, in 2006, ACI applied for and was awarded a three-year, \$600,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) to develop ACI's *College Success Network (CSN)*. CSN was a statewide, collaborative strategy to increase college retention and graduation rates among minority, low-income, and other at-risk students. By improving the odds for at-risk college students, ACI's *College Success Network* sought to promote learners' upward mobility and improve their long-term quality of life, while building the college-educated workforce the U.S. economy needed.

Piloted at 13 ACI member colleges and universities, *CSN* identified at-risk learners, assessed their individual needs, and provided the specific services they required to successfully earn a degree within six years of enrollment. These services ranged from scholarships to personalized counseling and academic supports, career guidance, campus orientations designed specifically to acculturate multi-cultural and low-income students to college life, leadership training, and peer mentoring. Each participating campus designed its own package of *CSN* services, while sharing best practices across the statewide network and adopting consistent tracking and assessment methodology so that data about *CSN* cohorts could be gathered and analyzed.

By fall 2007, ACI's *College Success Network* was serving 80 students in cohorts of freshmen and sophomores at 13 member colleges and universities, and research showed that the initiative already had increased retention rates. In fact, retention rates of *CSN* cohorts were as much as 17 points higher than the average rate for all students nationwide – a particularly meaningful outcome given the risk factors associated with *CSN* students. And although as with other populations, some attrition continued among *CSN* students beyond sophomore year, by December 2009, 68 percent of the 2006 *CSN* cohort remained enrolled at their original college/university and were on-track to graduate in spring 2010.

“Business leaders, policymakers, foundation executives and college presidents agree: The future success of the United States – as a nation, an economy, a culture – depends on developing a college-educated workforce ready for the challenges of the 21st century. Through ACI’s *College Success Network*, the Associated Colleges of Illinois will build capacity to prepare more Americans to play an active role in society.”
Jerry Fuller, Executive Director, The Associated Colleges of Illinois

As the first *CSN* cohorts began graduating, it was clear that ACI's *College Success Network* had been successful in increasing college persistence of low-income, first generation, and minority students: Retention and graduation rates among *CSN* students were almost twice that of other students with similar racial and economic barriers, and approximately 15 points higher than for *all* students on participating campuses. Most significantly, this rate was almost twice that of low-income and/or first generation college students who were enrolled at ACI member colleges but who did not receive services as part of a *College Success Network* cohort.

Contemporary research showed that nationwide, only 26 percent of low-income students and 41 percent of minority students who enroll in college ultimately earned a degree. By contrast, among ACI's *College Success Network* students who enrolled in member colleges in 2006, 65 percent had earned a degree

four years later. These positive results inspired ACI to continue to seek out new strategies for developing and funding college retention and completion services for the at-risk students who had begun to make up a growing percentage of the college-age population.

Liberal Arts Leads to Careers

The new millennium heralded dramatic shifts in the economy and in the shape and size of the workforce required to drive that economy. It had become increasingly clear both that a college degree was the undisputed ticket to upward mobility and that the job opportunities experiencing the most rapid growth were those requiring STEM degrees. Nonetheless, a 2011 report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers pointed out that employers were looking for precisely the skills for which liberal arts students always had been known: the ability to work on a team; verbal communication skills; problem-solving and decision-making skills; and the abilities to obtain and process information and to plan, organize, and prioritize work.

In 2010, the Associated Colleges of Illinois launched its *College to Careers Initiative* to help students enrolled at ACI institutions assess and leverage the skills cultivated by liberal arts education and define a viable career path. The initiative began with ACI's *Internship Program*, which provided students at member colleges and universities with experiential learning opportunities that helped them explore career paths in designated fields.

ACI Internships were designed to raise awareness of/interest in specific career fields; help employers meet the need for well-trained and motivated individuals; and facilitate successful transitions from college into the 21st century workforce. The *Internships* were expected to build a pool of trained prospective managers for participating employers by exposing participants to real-world, hands-on work experience/observations; providing them with career skills necessary for portfolio development; building students' professional networks in specific employment sectors; and providing interns with information about the needs, possibilities, and leadership roles available in representative employment sectors.

The inaugural ACI *Internships* were designed around this framework: ACI would partner with member colleges and universities, employers, and funders associated with specific fields or occupations. Host employers would commit to providing a viable educational experience that engaged interns in higher order management, project-specific activities, or marketing and communications functions. Internships were open to rising juniors and seniors who attended ACI member colleges and who had shown an interest in the relevant fields. Interns received stipends, but were responsible for arranging their own housing. Funding also was available to subsidize not-for-profit employers offering internships. Interns and host employers were required to provide weekly updates and final presentations to assess progress toward program goals and to promote continuous program improvement.

The ACI *Internship* model rolled out in summer 2010, in a pilot program known as *Developing the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders*, an effort to respond to a pressing need for managers to serve not-for-profit conservation organizations. A partnership between ACI, the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, and Chicago Wilderness, a consortium of conservation organizations, *Developing the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders* sought to tap into the pool of liberal arts students who might be interested in conservation and natural sciences, but might know very little about the not-for-profit conservation field.

The 2010 pilot provided internships at 10 Chicago-area conservation organizations to students representing 12 ACI colleges and universities. Interns reported high levels of satisfaction with the experience, gaining understanding of the conservation field and what is required of its leadership. Intern supervisors were equally positive about the experience and the quality of the interns' contributions to their organization, and the program was expected both to continue and to provide a model for similar efforts addressing the needs of other business and not-for-profit sectors. By 2011, plans were already under way to sustain ACI *Internships* and to find new ways to extend experiential learning opportunities to students enrolled on ACI campuses.

Standing Strong, Setting the Course for 2012 and Beyond

The worldwide recession that began in 2008 devastated the not-for-profit community. Not only was there a contraction in the public funding that had fueled ACI's *Center for Success in High-Need Schools* and its *College Success Network*, but shrinking corporate profits and the erosion in market value of foundation endowments significantly reduced private funding available as well. Nonetheless, the Associated Colleges of Illinois met all its program objectives, returned to member institutions scholarship dollars and other funding equal to or in excess of their membership dues, and maintained an annual surplus every year for decade extending from its 50th anniversary to its 60th year.

Over the course of 2011, the Associated Colleges of Illinois undertook an extensive planning process aimed at keeping the organization strong and ensuring that – even in challenging economic times – ACI remained a value-added partner to its member colleges, their students, ACI's home state of Illinois, and the nation at large. This planning process sharpened ACI's focus on maintaining strict control over expenses, increasing fundraising activity, and redefining program offerings to respond to current needs and concerns. ACI's mission statement set the course for the decade to come:

The Associated Colleges of Illinois is a network of private, non-profit, residential colleges and universities that works with business and community leaders to design and implement innovative and collaborative programs to:

- help low-income, minority, and first-generation students prepare for and successfully graduate from college
- help students develop the professional skills they need to successfully launch careers
- support college and university leadership in their efforts to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education.

ACI's strategic plan equipped the organization to remain not just stable, but full of purpose and vitality as it launched its seventh decade of service to Illinois' critical network of liberal arts-based, private colleges and universities.

***Creating opportunities
by building on strength.***

1952-2012



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