



# Associated Colleges of Illinois

## Quincy University's ACI Peer Mentoring Program nurtures five first-generation freshmen from small-town Illinois

For Randi Scheer, Kayce Smith and Kara McCleary, arriving at [Quincy University](#) for freshman year felt like moving to the big city. Compared to the small towns and even smaller high schools they left behind, settling into Quincy, Illinois' community of 40,000+ seemed as daunting as moving to Chicago or New York. But at Quincy University, the three young women found they shared more than small-town upbringing and homesickness. Now they are linked by a shared commitment to future careers in nursing -- and by the support of ACI's Peer Mentoring Program.

ACI's Peer Mentoring model matches low-income, first-generation and/or minority freshmen (mentees) with sophomores, juniors or seniors from similar backgrounds (mentors). The older, wiser mentors guide mentees through the twists and turns of freshman year, building a "relationship bridge" between mentees and the campus community and its support services. The mentor-mentee relationship also provides the framework for an "early warning system" that can anticipate the particular challenges these students face and address those challenges before they derail students' college career. The result is higher freshman-to-sophomore year retention rates and, ultimately, higher graduation rates for participating students.



Randi Scheer, Mt. Sterling, Illinois, is a first-generation student at Quincy University.

At Quincy University, Kara McCleary, a 19-year-old sophomore nursing major, mentors a cohort of five freshmen, including Scheer, 18, and Smith, 18. McCleary, a first-generation college student, hails from Mendon, Illinois, a town of 900 about 15 miles north of Quincy. She receives a \$2,500 scholarship as compensation for her mentoring efforts. However, McCleary calls the money "a bonus." She's glad to help. "I wish I'd had someone to tell me the ins and outs of college and Quincy," McCleary says. "I didn't know how to find anything, where to go. Now I can use my experience to help new students." The primary message to her mentees? – "You're going to have to work harder than in high school, but relax. It's going to be OK."

Mentee Randi Scheer is getting that message. She came to Quincy University from Mt. Sterling, Illinois, a town of about 2,000 between Quincy and Jacksonville. Scheer had already completed

a Certified Nurse Assistant program at a local community college, and her experience working with patients as a CNA motivated her to pursue a nursing career. But the first-generation college student struggled with homesickness. "It's a challenge being away from home," she says. "I'm a family person, and it's hard to be away from my mom, my aunts, my brothers." Scheer's mom is a secretary; dad is an over-the-road truck driver, and she says, "My parents are really proud of me for going to college. They wanted me to get out of town and not be stuck in the same job for the rest of my life." Scheer lives in Quincy's Nursing Living and Learning Community and works as a lifeguard at the school's sports complex. She really appreciates McCleary's mentoring. "I like having someone to talk to who's always there to help me, but won't judge me, doesn't know my family. She's there just for me."



**Kayce Smith, left, says ACI's Peer Mentoring Program at Quincy University has improved her college experience, and she talks often with mentor Kara McCleary, right, a sophomore nursing major at Quincy.**

Mentee Kayce Smith hails from Griggsville, Illinois, a small town about an hour northeast of Quincy, where Smith graduated with a class of 13 from a high school enrolling a total of only 100 students. The middle child among five siblings, Smith is the first in her family to go to college. She chose Quincy because it was close to home. "Growing up I saw my parents struggle financially," Smith recalls. "I want to go my own route and be more successful, and my parents wanted that for me too." Inspired by stories her mother told her about her work as a mental health technician, Smith chose nursing as her future career, but transitioning to college to

achieve that goal has been challenging. "The small classes are great," Smith observes. "But you have to get a lot more information in a lot less time. I've had to learn to manage my time much better than before." Being part of ACI's Peer Mentoring Program has helped, says Smith, who frequently lunches with mentor Kara McCleary. "It's really nice to have someone who has been through a lot of the same things I'm going through," she says. "My mentor is always there for me, and because she's also a nursing major, we share a lot of the same challenges."

Launched in fall 2016, Quincy's Peer Mentoring Program is part of a comprehensive menu of "student success services" housed at the college's Student Success Center. There, under the supervision of Center Director Christine Tracy, faculty, staff and students collaborate to advance academic success for all students, especially those with specific risk factors (low-income, first-generation and/or minority standing), conditionally admitted students, students on academic probation, and those returning to the university after a suspension. Center services include "Success Coaches" and academic advising for all Quincy students, as well as tutoring, academic support courses (study skills, writing skills, etc.), and supplemental instruction. In addition, low-income students can take advantage of the center's book loan program and its "Career Success Closet," which provides business-appropriate wardrobe items students need for internships and job interviews. Tracy, once a first-generation college student herself, points out that in the 2015-16 academic year, 93 percent of Quincy University's 1,100 students accessed services at the Student Success Center.

Looking at the Peer Mentoring Program in the context of the Student Success Center, Tracy says: "Our mentoring program provides another opportunity for Quincy University students to transition from high school to college with ease. The program provides students with a confidante, mentor and friend who understands the challenges and struggles they may face as a first-generation college student and can help celebrate their successes along the way. It is an honor to be awarded this grant from ACI and a privilege to see not only the mentees grow, but to watch our mentor grow."

A contemporary liberal arts university offering highly respected academic programs, including a range of internships to help prepare students for career success, Quincy University was founded by Franciscan Friars in 1860. Today, Quincy University welcomes students of all faith traditions, while continuing to honor the Franciscan commitment to respect for all persons and to humankind's connection to all of creation. Quincy offers small, stimulating classes, with faculty and staff who know each student personally and encourage each to develop their unique talents. Highly affordable and generous in its scholarships, Quincy also offers many diverse campus activities, spiritual retreats, service trips and study abroad, in addition to award-winning athletic programs.