

## ACI Launches Virtual Benefit Reception May 1 May 1, 2020



*President Jamel SC  
Wright*

"This is an unprecedented time, and our students need your unprecedented support." With this observation, Dr. Jamel SC Wright, president of [Eureka College](#), Eureka, Illinois, and president of Associated Colleges of Illinois, expresses the urgency driving ACI's Virtual Benefit Reception, which launches Friday, May 1, at <https://acifund.org/2020-aci-virtual-benefit-reception/>. The virtual event stands in for ACI's 2020 Annual Benefit Reception, originally scheduled for April 17, at the University Club of Chicago. Attendees at ACI's Virtual Benefit Reception can give to the organization [here](#).

Virtual Benefit Reception sponsors are **Aon, Fidelity Charitable, Gallagher, Husch Blackwell and Robbins Schwartz.**

"The COVID-19 emergency may be keeping us apart," says Frank Cella, managing director, Marsh, and chair of [ACI's Board of Trustees](#), "but you can still get to know ACI, our member colleges and universities, the students we serve, and their compelling stories and support our work by navigating through [the virtual benefit page]."



*Frank Cella*

Wright has already heard some of those stories from her students at Eureka College. "We are all being pressure-tested, and the lives of our students ... have been completely upended." Some students, she says, worry that their families can't afford to feed them at home. Others fear that, with parents now unemployed, they will be unable to return to school in the fall. Addressing the virtual audience, Wright hopes that, "while I can't see you, your heart is still wide open and that you remain on the ready to champion ACI students with your generous support."



*Melissa Donaldson*

Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ACI's Virtual Benefit Reception gives visitors the chance to hear messages from keynote speaker Melissa Donaldson, vice president and chief diversity officer at Wintrust Financial Corporation, from ACI leadership and from students at ACI member institutions who have benefited from ACI scholarships and participated in ACI's Peer Mentoring Program.

Donaldson articulates why supporting higher education is so important to society: "Our very survival as a society depends on innovation, creativity and ingenuity in abundance, all steeped in brilliance." [Donaldson](#) who has established diversity and inclusion efforts at Wintrust, Walgreens and CDW, asserts that, "brilliance is evident in the many impressive outcomes that elevate the stature of ACI member colleges and universities ... and brilliance is cultivated in the wonderfully diverse population of students across the [27 campuses](#) under the ACI umbrella."

Three students who tell their stories on the virtual benefit page illustrate that diversity.

**Montse Cancino-Aguilar, a junior at Knox College,** is an aspiring scientist, double majoring in biology and Latin American studies at [Knox College](#) and a recipient of a scholarship from the Michele and Peter S. Willmott Minority Student Leadership Fund, through ACI. A Latina and first-generation college student, she admits her family did not want her to go away to college. But her high school counselor and teachers helped convince her that she "... deserved better than ... the community college that my family begged me to choose." She was accepted to Knox College, but just days before Cancino-Aguilar began her freshman year, both her parents lost their jobs. Although she worked multiple jobs freshman year, she couldn't earn enough -- until a Knox financial aid officer told her about ACI scholarships. "I would not be at Knox if it wasn't for ACI," says Cancino-Aguilar, who was able to continue in college and travel to Panama to study biodiversity and resource management. ACI donors, she says, gave her "a fighting chance to make it out there in the world with a bachelor's degree in my hand. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity ... to be one of the many faces of first-gens and Latinos everywhere."



*Montse Cancino-Aguilar*



*Chloe Overstreet*

**Chloe Overstreet is a sophomore at Eureka College,** majoring in history and political science and business administration. A first-generation student from a small town in rural Illinois, Overstreet's path to college was rocky. Her father encouraged her, but her mother didn't want her to go away to college, and they could not afford her tuition. When Overstreet's father was killed in a work accident during her senior year in high school, college seemed impossible. Nevertheless, with the support of friends and teachers, she persevered. She chose Eureka College after their admissions counselor called to ask how she was doing and how he could help. After attending Eureka's three-day orientation for first-generation students, she knew Eureka was the right decision. "It showed me there were people who ... were there to support me," Overstreet says, "... that it was possible to be a first-generation student with an unconventional support system and still graduate college."

[ACI's Peer Mentoring Program](#) helped Overstreet navigate freshman year. Now, she serves as a mentor in the program "to let other students know that they are not alone, and there is always someone there ... who wants them to succeed." And thanks to the ACI mentor scholarship, Overstreet borrowed less this year and was able to hang on to her savings. "It offered relief from the anxiety of feeling like I will not be able to pay my balance or afford basic necessities," she says. "The ACI Peer Mentoring Program made a huge difference in my college experience."

**Chandler Claudé is a senior accounting major at Monmouth College,** a first-generation college student and an ACI peer mentor. Growing up on Chicago's South Side, he says, "I didn't know many college graduates in my area. Finding mentors was hard." His family was very poor, and his mother worked three jobs to help him stay in a private high school. Although Claudé wasn't the strongest student in high school, he wanted to get a college degree to pay his mom back for her sacrifices.



*Chandler Claude'*

At [Monmouth College](#), Claudé says he "faced many struggles not fully understanding simple things like emotional intelligence, how to write an email to a professor, or develop effective time management skills." A few months into freshman year, Claudé he found a mentor, someone who truly understood the challenges he faced as a first-generation student. "We did homework together a lot," Claudé. "He would text me to tell me to come to the library and get a study session in ... My first semester I was able to get a 3.3, and I remember I was on Cloud 9 ... The hard work and accountability my newfound mentor

gave me really started this." The experience prompted him to become an ACI peer mentor. "...I have learned so much about life and school and I felt that I needed to pass it on to another first-gen student," he says. "I wanted to be a cheerleader for someone because that's what I needed during my freshman year: having someone hold me accountable for study and goals was important." He's enjoyed seeing his mentees growing during the year. "I earned their trust by sharing my story and letting them know I want to see them succeed whether in athletics or band, and more importantly in the classroom." His message to ACI donors? "This is a great investment because you are creating a family away from home and giving them meaningful resources to succeed through the tough college adjustment."



*J. Vincent Williams*

J. Vincent Williams, director of business and entrepreneurship services for the YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago and a member of ACI's Board of Trustees, echoes many of these sentiments. As an African American male, he says he knows what it's like to worry about having the money for books and how tough it is to navigate without the benefit of mentors. In spite of recent speculation that a college degree may not be worth what it once was in the job market, Williams says that investing in ACI students is an investment in our future. These students, "will give us the resilience to recover from whatever pandemic, crisis or hurdle comes down the line," he says.

"A gift to ACI," says Williams, "can make college obtainable, affordable and possible for a promising young person – give them that mentor who will help them successfully transition from high school to college and help them develop the career-ready skills they will need to return your investment as members of our future workforce."

Lyn Bulman, retired from her role as executive vice president at Fellowes Brands, encourages donors to look to the future: "As a member of the board of trustees of Associated Colleges of Illinois and chair of ACI's program committee, part of my job is to think about our future," she says. "But this pandemic will end, and we must be forward-thinking. We must take steps now to ensure that all our ACI colleges and universities have the resources to welcome their students back next fall – and that the financial emergency prompted by COVID-19 does not deter any student from achieving their college dreams."



*Lyn Bulman*

**To help secure those dreams for students at ACI member colleges and universities, visit the ACI giving page [here](#). To experience the full virtual ACI Benefit Reception, attend the event [here](#).**