



Associated Colleges of Illinois

Iga Szlag
North Park University
ACI Peer Mentoring Program

Iga Szlag is a first-generation student at [North Park University](#), Chicago. Born in Poland, she moved to the United States when she was two years old and lives in Niles, Illinois. Szlag just completed her second year in college and majors in accounting, with hopes of one day becoming a Certified Public Accountant (CPA).



She wanted to attend a small college in the Chicago area, and like many friends, she visited and liked what she saw. Plus, North Park is close to her home. She's gotten to work closely with professors, too. "They really take the time to make sure you know what you're learning and what you're learning it for. There's a purpose for everything that you're doing here," Szlag says. She also likes that the university helps students with career counseling and building career networks.

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Szelag got involved in ACI's Peer Mentoring Program at North Park through Compass, an orientation program for incoming freshmen and a scholarship she earned through Lighthouse, a program for first-generation college students. She decided to become a peer mentor as a way to return her appreciation for mentors that had helped her. "I did my mentoring the first year, and it was a great experience. Because it was so great, I came back to be a mentor again," she says. Plus, she says she has learned a lot by interacting with mentees.

"One of my mentees -- I remember she had a really hard time. She wasn't from Illinois. She was from out of state a couple of hours away. She had a hard time adjusting and the homesickness, and I took the role of always saying hi and checking on her to make sure she was doing OK," Szelag says. "As a mentor for me it was important to make sure they're not alone during that time, during that transition. So, I always made sure they were still coming out to the different activities that we had planned for the day that they would come out to dinner and still socialize with everyone."

Despite her parents' limited knowledge about college, it is important to them that Szelag and her older brother attend college and earn degrees. Her brother earned a kinesiology degree at a Chicago university, and he plans to attend graduate school. "They put in the sacrifice because they know that me and my brother will have careers after we graduate," she says, adding that the North Park staff has been enormously helpful to her.

Szelag says peer mentors provide a critical helping hand to first-generation students in their first year. We're here to be friends with the mentees, and we're here to help them out. College isn't the easiest thing. It can be intense."