



Associated Colleges of Illinois

Annual Report 2024 - 2025



Associated Colleges of Illinois supports member colleges and universities by advancing independent liberal arts and sciences education and helping underserved students succeed in college, career and life.

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Dear Friends,

As I close my third year as Executive Director of Associated Colleges of Illinois, I remain grounded in a clear and steady commitment: to strengthen ACI's financial sustainability while expanding the value we deliver to our member institutions and, most importantly, to the students we serve.

Over the past year, our work has been guided by four priorities: growing awareness of ACI's brand, increasing scholarship support, expanding student professional development and internship opportunities, and deepening connections between our campuses and corporate partners. Each of these efforts reflects a shared belief that when we work together, we can create stronger pathways for students across Illinois.

More than half of ACI's member institutions have welcomed new presidents within the past three years. Benchmarking against peer state council organizations has reinforced an important reality: without the benefit of a large endowment, delivering strong financial returns to our members requires focus, discipline, and collaboration. That understanding shapes our approach, bringing members together, listening closely, and aligning efforts with most pressing needs.

We closed FY25 with a modest surplus for the second consecutive year in a row, returning a minimum of 110 percent in cash value back to member schools. We strengthened our partnership with BravenX, promising to double our investment in the coming year to support 40 students in a 14-week fellowship designed to build the skills, confidence, and networks essential for career success. And, through the collective support of our community, we raised a \$20,000 scholarship goal that was matched to deliver a total of \$40,000 directly to students this fall.

These outcomes are more than metric; they are evidence of what is possible when ACI and its members move forward together with purpose. We've also increased sharing of student success stories and member school news to highlight impact and community.

As we look at FY26, our focus remains clear: to deepen engagement, expand opportunities through added partnerships and ensure that ACI continues to be an effective partner for every member institution. The challenges facing the higher education sector are real, but so too is our collective capacity to meet them.

Thank you for your partnership, your leadership, and your belief in the mission we share to make a difference, one student at a time.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "April". The signature is fluid and cursive.

April Arnold
Executive Director



Pictured from left to right: Dr. Aaron Kuecker, Toby Eveland, Mikayla Z., Aries Pickett, Marie Trzuppek Lynch, and Shannon Fuller.

INFORMATION ON PROGRAMS, ACTIVITIES, AND EVENTS

2025 BREAKFAST FORUM: FROM COLLEGE TO CAREER

On April 10, 2025, Associated Colleges of Illinois convened its annual Breakfast Forum at Saul Ewing LLP, bringing together leaders from business, higher education, and workforce development to examine how colleges and employers can better align education with career readiness. The event served as a catalyst for collaboration and a powerful demonstration of ACI's role in connecting students with the opportunities they need to thrive after graduation.

The keynote address was delivered by **Aries Pickett**, Director of People Operations for the National Women's Soccer League and an alumna of Eureka College. Drawing on her leadership in human resources within professional sports, Pickett emphasized the importance of trust, collaboration, and intentional workplace culture in attracting and retaining talent, insights that resonated strongly with employers and educators alike.

The panel discussion, moderated by **Toby Eveland**, Chicago Managing Partner at Saul Ewing LLP, featured a distinguished group of leaders:

- **Shannon Fuller**, Vice President of Talent Solutions at Health Care Service Corporation
- **Dr. Aaron J. Kuecker**, President of Trinity Christian College
- **Marie Trzuppek Lynch**, Chief People Officer at Morningstar, Inc.



Michael W., Student at North Park University

Together, they explored how organizations are building talent pipelines, the continued value of a liberal arts education in developing adaptable leaders, and strategies for cultivating inclusive workplaces where new graduates can succeed.

Following the discussion, attendees participated in roundtable conversations and networking sessions that deepened dialogue between employers and higher education partners, reinforcing ACI's commitment to bridging the gap between college and career.

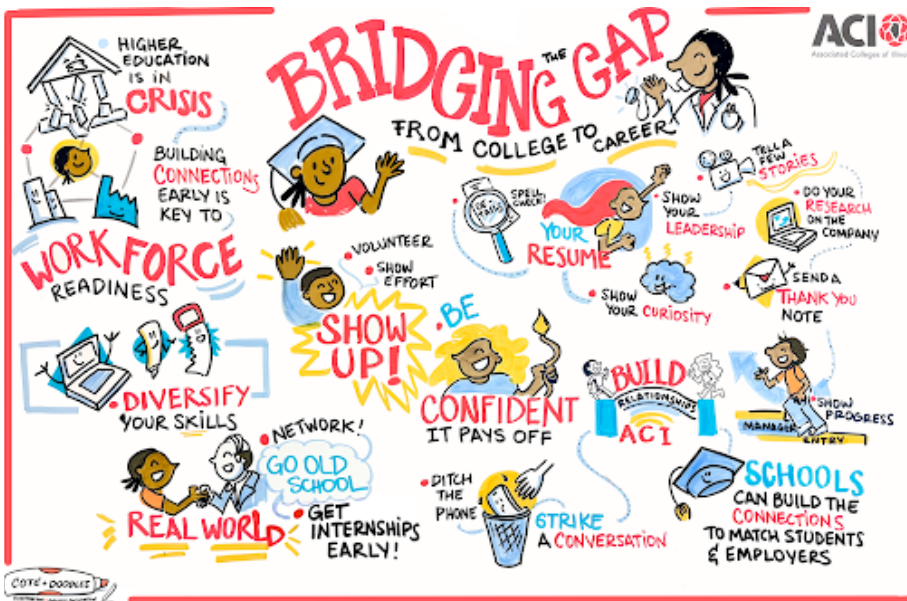


Keynote Speaker: Aries Pickett

The event also demonstrated the strength of ACI's philanthropic community. The Breakfast Forum generated \$63,000 in net proceeds, including more than \$12,000 in individual contributions, directly supporting scholarships and student-centered programming at ACI member institutions. Notably, \$2,390 of these gifts qualify as new or increased contributions toward the **FY26 Council of Independent Colleges Scholarship Challenge Grant Match**, amplifying their long-term impact for students.

The forum was made possible through the generous support of our sponsors and partners, whose investments advance ACI's mission to expand opportunity for students across Illinois. Partner sponsors included **Environmental Design International, Fiducient Advisors, ForvisMazars, Gallagher, Hogan Marren Babbo & Rose, Husch Blackwell, Jackson Lewis, and William Blair.** Advocate sponsors included **DeVry University, Fissinger Fundraising, Uwill, and Wintrust Financial Corporation,** with in-kind support from **QuestFood and Saul Ewing LLP.**

Through gatherings like the Breakfast Forum, ACI continues to bring together leaders who share a common goal: ensuring that talented students, regardless of background, have access to the education, mentorship, and career pathways that transform potential into lasting impact.



“With a parent passing, life suddenly changes, and things become 10x harder. So, by providing these funds to me, you are taking away the stress of trying to pay for school. Thank you.

McKenzie |
Eureka College |
Sociology & Psychology

”

Special thanks to Coté Soerens of Coté Doodles, whose live graphic recording captured the ideas and energy of the morning, preserving the conversation in a dynamic visual format.



Eureka College Peer Mentoring Program: First Gen

STUDENT PROGRAMS

ACI's College-to-Career Programs reflect an emphasis on supporting students preparing to transition to careers and matching employers with talent emerging from ACI member colleges and universities. This effort addresses preparing students for future employment by building critical life skills, identifying career opportunities, networking with employers, and securing rewarding first-time jobs.

Associated Colleges of Illinois continually seeks to address critical challenges that independent higher education can help solve through collaborations among its member colleges and universities, businesses, nonprofit partners, and public and private funders. ACI programs address two key national priorities:

1. Improve the outcomes of higher education by raising graduation rates among low-income and first-generation students.
2. Reduce college debt by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education and by providing financial aid that makes independent higher education affordable to an increasingly diverse student population.

PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

Programs like peer mentoring ensure that students who arrive on campus full of promise have the support they need to stay and succeed.

Since its launch in 2013, the Peer Mentoring Program at Associated Colleges of Illinois (ACI) has strengthened student persistence and graduation outcomes across member campuses by supporting first-year students who face barriers to college success. The program focuses particularly on first-generation and low- to moderate-income students, many of whom are Pell Grant eligible, pairing them with trained upper-level peers who share similar backgrounds and lived experiences.



Augustana Viking Mentors for first-year students

Through consistent mentorship, accountability, and encouragement, peer mentors help first-year students navigate the academic, financial, and social transitions that define the critical first year of college. This relationship-centered model creates a bridge to campus resources while also serving as an early alert system, identifying concerns before they escalate and ensuring students receive timely support.

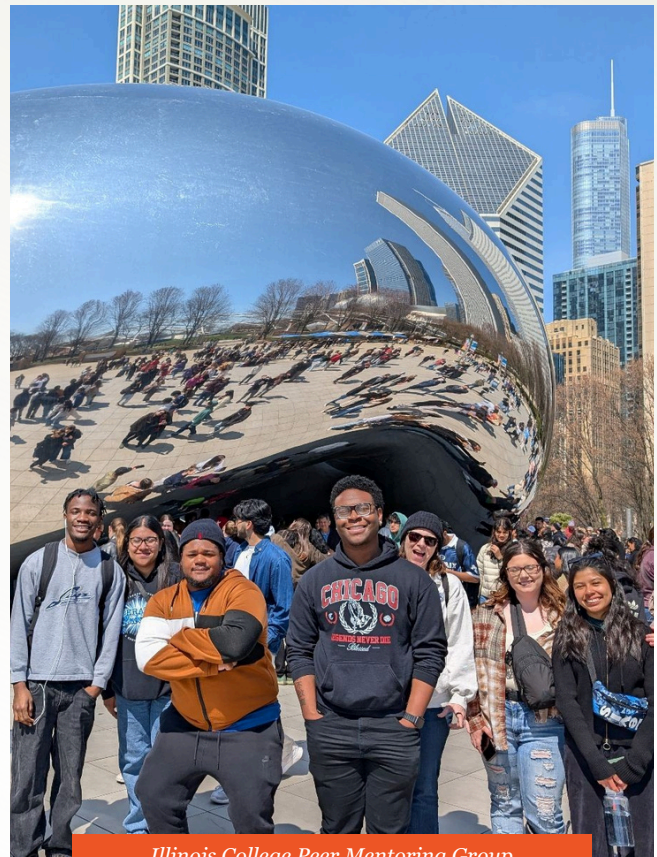
Peer mentoring means something different to each of our participating institutions. Leading the charge for incoming students, they continue to demonstrate the power of peer connection. During the 2024–2025 academic year, 94% of mentees and 94% of mentors returned for the Spring semester. The Peer Mentoring Program served 98 students, including 80 mentees and 18 mentors, at 8 ACI-member institutions in urban, suburban, and rural communities across Illinois. Peer mentoring coordinators and student leaders provide invaluable support to students at **Augustana College, Eureka College, Illinois College, Millikin University, Monmouth College, North Park University, Quincy University, and Rockford University.**

Campus leaders emphasize that the program’s success lies in its intentional design and focus on high-impact practices. At Rockford University, students are gaining new opportunities to build confidence, leadership skills, and real-world experience.

As Dr. Walker, Dean of Student Support and founder of the Men of Confidence Mentoring Program, explains, the program helps institutions address gaps many first-generation students experience when entering higher education.



“You have to have intentionality about high-impact practices that we know will help students, especially first-generation, low-income students,” she notes. “It allows them to persist and helps us retain them so they accomplish the goal of graduation.”



For many students, mentorship also connects academic progress with life beyond college. Dr. Walker highlights how the program complements other career-focused initiatives, including ACI’s partnership with Braven. Through the BravenX program, Rockford University has connected Peer Mentoring participants and other first-generation students with career preparation resources that help them envision their path after graduation.

Equally important is the program’s emphasis on practical, hands-on guidance. **As Dr. Walker explains, “Our students sometimes don’t benefit from the ‘kitchen table conversation’ about how college works. They need practical experience and support. That’s why programs like Peer Mentoring are so critical.”**

By combining peer relationships, proactive support systems, and career-connected opportunities, ACI’s Peer Mentoring Program continues to expand opportunity, deepen belonging, and strengthen degree completion for students across Illinois.



BRAVENX: EXPANDING CAREER PATHWAYS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

This year, Associated Colleges of Illinois launched a strategic partnership with Braven to expand career development opportunities for students across the ACI network. Through the BravenX pilot program, students participate in a 14-week virtual fellowship designed to equip them with the skills, experiences, and professional connections needed to secure strong first jobs after graduation.

The fellowship combines weekly cohort-based training with one-on-one mentorship from industry professionals, exposure to employer networks, and guidance on career pathways.

These experiences provide students, particularly those who may not have access to professional networks at home, with practical preparation for entering today's competitive workforce.

During the Fall 2024 pilot, ACI fully sponsored participation for 20 students from **Augustana College, Judson University, North Central College, and Rockford University**. The program has delivered strong outcomes: ACI students exceeded BravenX national benchmarks in enrollment, attendance, course performance, and assignment completion.

Importantly, the impact extends well beyond the 14-week experience. BravenX continues supporting participants throughout their remaining college years and for six months after graduation, helping students translate their academic achievements into meaningful employment opportunities.

For funders and partners committed to strengthening workforce pathways, this collaboration demonstrates how targeted investment can connect students with the mentorship, preparation, and professional networks that turn a college degree into long-term career success.

Through partnerships like BravenX, ACI continues to ensure that students graduate not only with a degree but with the confidence, connections, and skills to thrive in the workforce. Next year, we aim to double our student numbers to 40, with plans for further growth.



ACI MICRO-INTERNSHIPS, WITH PARKER DEWEY

Through its partnership with Parker Dewey, Associated Colleges of Illinois is expanding access to meaningful, paid professional experiences for students across its member institutions. The initiative connects students with micro-internships—short-term, paid assignments that mirror the real-world work typically completed by new hires or summer interns.

Unlike traditional internships, micro-internships are flexible and offered year-round. Most projects range from 10 to 40 hours of work and are completed within one week to one month, making them accessible to students who may not be able to commit to a full semester or summer internship.

Throughout the year, ACI actively promoted these opportunities to both member campuses and corporate partners, highlighting how micro-internships create equitable access to career-building experiences. Students gain the chance to demonstrate their skills, explore potential career paths, and build professional networks. Employers benefit as well—gaining access to a diverse and motivated talent pool while receiving timely support on meaningful projects.



Without generous people like you, many students would have to make big decisions that could lead to dropping out of college.

Grant | Millikin University | Criminal Justice & Commercial Music



By connecting 11 ACI member institutions across urban, suburban, and rural Illinois with forward-thinking employers, this partnership strengthens the bridge between higher education and the workforce. For students, these experiences provide critical early exposure to professional environments. Employers offer a flexible pathway to discover emerging talent.

Together, these connections ensure that more ACI students graduate not only with academic knowledge, but with the practical experience and professional confidence needed to succeed in their careers.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND EMERGENCY FINANCIAL AID

This year, students across our member campuses demonstrated remarkable resilience, persevering through financial hardship, balancing academic and personal responsibilities, and continuing to pursue their education with purpose and courage. Many are the first in their families to attend college, carrying both the weight of expectation and the promise of new opportunity.

Through scholarships, peer mentoring, and collaborative initiatives, ACI helps ensure that these students are not forced to pause their progress when challenges arise. With the right support at the right moment, their perseverance becomes achievement, allowing them to remain enrolled, complete their degrees, and step forward as leaders in their communities and professions.

- This year, ACI awarded 220 scholarships totaling \$369,100 to 218 unique students across our member institutions.
- In addition, \$100,002 in emergency financial aid was distributed to 50 students facing urgent and unexpected financial challenges, helping them remain enrolled and on track to complete their degrees.
- Through the ACI Peer Mentoring Program, \$42,400 in program support was provided to benefit 80 mentees and 18 mentors. These funds supported campus coordinators, mentor stipends, and student engagement activities that strengthen connection, belonging, and academic persistence.

WILLMOTT STUDENT LEADERSHIP SCHOLARSHIP

Peter Willmott, a respected business and civic leader who served as Chair of the ACI Board of Directors, deeply believed in the transformative power of education. Along with his wife, Michele, he established a substantial endowment to support scholarships awarded annually through ACI member colleges and universities. The Michele and Peter Willmott Fund for Minority Student Leadership Scholarship assists students with financial need and demonstrated leadership, enabling them to pursue their educational goals and expand their impact on campus and beyond.

This support not only benefits the current students but also opens doors for future generations, as their lives are changed by these scholarships.

One such student is Saul V., a Willmott Scholar. His story illustrates the difference scholarship support can make in the life of a student striving to create a better future for himself and his community.

Saul, a sophomore at Knox College majoring in Environmental Studies with a minor in Business, and a first-generation college student, understands that earning a degree is about more than personal success; it is an opportunity to create new possibilities for his family and contribute to the communities he hopes to serve.

“Growing up in a lower-income family and being a first-generation student has shaped my dreams and my determination,” Saul shared.

Through his work at the Knox Farm and his passion for sustainability, Saul has developed a vision for helping cities like Chicago expand green spaces, strengthen local food systems, and increase equitable access to resources.

His journey reflects the broader impact of ACI’s support through the Willmott scholarship. When financial barriers are reduced, students can focus on their education, leadership development, and long-term goals. Scholarship support does more than help students stay enrolled; it empowers them to become the leaders, innovators, and changemakers who will strengthen their communities for years to come.

MCGRAW EMERGENCY FINANCIAL AID

For over 40 years, the McGraw Foundation has consistently supported ACI’s emergency financial aid initiatives. This enduring partnership has enabled thousands of students to stay enrolled, maintain stable housing, and continue their education during times of unforeseen financial difficulties.

“The McGraw Foundation made my dreams a reality and brought my hopes within reach.

Miranda | Augustana College | Music

ACI's Emergency Fund provides timely assistance to students who encounter critical challenges that could disrupt their academic progress. Whether it's covering tuition gaps, addressing housing instability, or meeting urgent medical and family needs, the fund acts as a vital safety net, allowing students to concentrate on their journey toward graduation.



*Kaydence H., Student at Illinois College
Recipient of the A. Montgomery Ward Foundation Scholarship*

In the 2024–2025 academic year, ACI distributed \$100,002 in emergency assistance to 50 students, with an average award of \$2,000. Since 1990, ACI has provided more than \$7 million in scholarships and emergency aid to over 3,000 students across its member institutions in Illinois.

For many students, this support is a crucial factor in determining whether they continue their education or drop out, providing not only financial relief but also the stability and peace of mind necessary for them to persist and achieve success.

ACI WEBINARS: CATALYSTS FOR CONNECTION AND OPPORTUNITY

As part of ACI's continued commitment to supporting member colleges and universities, the ACI Talent Strategy Conversations webinar series is designed to strengthen connections between our institutions and corporate partners. In response to member school requests, the series creates valuable engagement opportunities to help graduating students transition successfully into the workforce.

ACI Talent Strategy Conversation with Morningstar

**Hosted by Meredith Brinson, Director of
Career Development and Transformation**

November 19, 2024

This conversation explored the Morningstar Development Program, a 2-year program built to prepare recent college graduates. Hires are placed in a cohort where they receive ongoing career development, networking, mentoring, and training opportunities.

ACI Talent Strategy Conversation with The Precisionists, Inc.

Featuring Tim Fox Sr., Senior Client Executive

April 1, 2025

This conversation explored innovative approaches to expanding career opportunities for neurodiverse individuals and the value of inclusive hiring practices.

ACI Talent Strategy Conversation with Health Care Service Corporation

**Featuring Shannon D. Fuller, Vice President
of Talent Solutions**

April 7, 2025

This session examined employer strategies for recruiting and retaining recent graduates in a competitive hiring landscape.

Associated Colleges of Illinois ensures that its member institutions remain responsive, resilient, and aligned with workforce needs by connecting colleges with employers, amplifying student voices, and equipping leaders with timely insights. These convenings are more than conversations; they are catalysts for action. ACI brought together higher education and industry designed to strengthen career pathways and institutional strategy.

ACI FINANCIALS: JUNE 1, 2024 TO MAY 31, 2025

Financial information is presented for ACI’s fiscal year ending May 31, 2025. ERAG Eiffel, Rambo Advisory Group Certified Public Accountants, issued ACI an unmodified opinion on the financial statements.

As of May 31, total assets were \$1,617,684 while liabilities were \$344,672. Total Net Assets were \$1,273,012. Gifts, awards, and other services totaling \$511,502 were distributed to members during the year.

ABBREVIATED STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

Assets

Cash.....	\$459,214
Accounts Receivable.....	42,000
Investments.....	1,022,100
Property and equipment (net).....	6,546
Other assets.....	<u>87,824</u>
Total assets.....	\$1,617,684

Liabilities

Scholarships and other distributions.....	\$234,000
Other liabilities.....	110,672
Net assets.....	<u>1,273,012</u>
Total liabilities and net assets.....	\$1,617,684

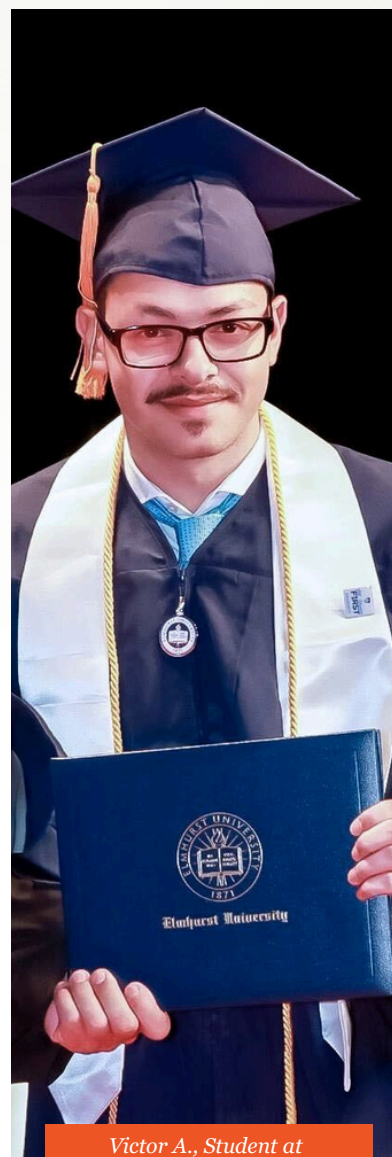
ABBREVIATED STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

Support and revenue

Contributions	\$809,918
Member assessments.....	459,990
Corporate partnerships	22,473
Investment income (net).....	23,019
Other income.....	<u>112,371</u>
Total support and revenue.....	\$1,427,771

Expenses

Gifts, awards and other services to members.....	\$511,502
Other programs.....	268,720
Management and general.....	237,699
Fundraising.....	186,919
Total expenses.....	<u>1,204,840</u>
Change in net assets.....	\$222,931



Victor A., Student at Elmhurst University



I see every day how higher education transforms lives, strengthens communities, and expands opportunity. I’m proud to support a mission that helps ensure that same access and impact continue for generations to come.

Ellen Babbit | Husch Blackwell LLP | ACI Board Member





HONOR ROLL OF DONORS

Associated Colleges of Illinois gratefully recognizes the commitment of individuals, foundations, corporations, and organizations that made contributions between June 1, 2024, and May 31, 2025.

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This scholarship means more than financial assistance; it's encouragement and motivation to keep pursuing my dreams, step by step, while giving back to my community.

Samantha | Rockford University | Elementary Education



ACI 2025 BREAKFAST FORUM: FROM COLLEGE TO CAREER

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We make every effort to correctly list our donors. If we have made any errors or omissions, we sincerely apologize and ask that you contact Daisy Gomez at dgomez@acifund.org.

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ACI Corporate Partners provide vital support to ACI and our member colleges and universities in two key ways. First, they make an annual financial commitment to ACI, which helps cover operating costs and fund essential programs. Second, each Corporate Partner offers products and services specifically designed to address the unique challenges faced by higher education institutions. Many ACI member institutions already collaborate with these partners, and we encourage all ACI members to connect with our Corporate Partners first when they need the products or services these businesses provide.

With continued support, ACI can expand scholarships, strengthen mentorship programs, and ensure that students across our member campuses have the resources they need to persist, graduate, and lead.



I come from a single-parent, low-income household, so I am unable to afford my final semester without financial aid. I am relieved to be able to focus on my studies knowing that tuition is no longer a hurdle.

Linda | Lewis University | Organizational Communications



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ACI MEMBER COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

For the 2024-2025 academic year, ACI proudly supports a diverse network of independent colleges and universities in Illinois, committed to quality education and student opportunities. We are honored to work with our member schools to expand access to higher education and strengthen the state's workforce.

1. Augustana College
2. Blackburn College
3. Elmhurst University
4. Eureka College
5. Illinois College
6. Illinois Wesleyan University
7. Judson University
8. Knox College
9. Lewis University
10. McKendree University
11. Millikin University
12. Monmouth College
13. North Central College
14. North Park University
15. Olivet Nazarene University
16. Principia College
17. Quincy University
18. Rockford University
19. Saint Xavier University
20. Trinity Christian College
21. University of St. Francis



Being a first-generation college student came with many challenges. However, my biggest concern has always been paying for tuition. The constant worry, whether through making monthly payments or covering unexpected costs, has been a major source of stress. It gives me peace of mind to fully focus on my education and not worry about falling behind on tuition payments.

Ray | Illinois College | Psychology



CLOSING REMARKS



FY25 marked another year of solid progress for ACI, with our financial position continuing to improve, and student scholarship support increased. Our social media presence gained more traction, drawing new eyes to our mission and activities. We are proud to have achieved all this in an increasingly challenging environment for higher education.

To meet these new challenges, during the fiscal year, several of our Board Trustees contributed to a strategic planning exercise which established the groundwork for defining ACI's next steps and we completed a review of corporate Board member background and skillsets to drive priorities for identifying new trustees.

After adding three new corporate trustees last fiscal year, we added just one in FY25, but I am excited about what Sabrina Bailey will contribute to our Board. Sabrina's business acumen and experience as CEO of Fiducient bring strong skills that will enhance and strengthen ACI's Board.

We are truly grateful for the continued generosity of the donors who make this work possible. We appreciate those who can make a tangible contribution to supporting our mission as well as those who show their support through non-financial means and attend ACI events.

Thank you for your commitment to making education available to more students. The need continues to grow, and I hope we can count on your support to meet that challenge.

Sincerely,

Lyn Bulman
Board Chair, Associated Colleges of Illinois



I grew up without a dad. So, my mother, single with two children and caring for my elderly grandmother, is the provider for our family. She is not able to help me with school. I have private loans, which I have maxed out through financial aid, and I'm working three jobs...I'm just trying to do everything I can to be able to stay at Judson. Thank you for everything that you do in helping students reach their goals and giving them the faith and hope that they are able to finish their degrees.

Abigael | Judson University | Kinesiology





Associated Colleges of Illinois

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