



# stronger together

Creating Opportunity for Every Learner

## Conference Agenda

February 26, 2026

Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, Illinois

### CONTENT

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# SCHEDULE

● ○ ○ Introductory   ● ● ○ Intermediate   ● ● ● Advanced

8–9 A.M.

*Check in, breakfast, and networking*

9–10:15 A.M.

## Welcome and Opening Plenary

MORAINÉ ROOMS 1–3

### ● ○ ○ The Future of Work: Navigating the Next Decade of Jobs, Skills, and Opportunity

As the pace of technological change accelerates and global labor markets evolve, understanding the future of work has never been more critical. Keynote speaker Jeff Strohl, PhD, Research Professor & Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, will set the stage with a forward-looking analysis of projected employment trends, educational demands, and training requirements through 2031. Drawing on the latest data and research, Dr. Strohl will explore the evolving role of education and credentials in workforce readiness, the emerging skill sets and training pathways needed to meet future demand, and how demographic shifts and automation will reshape job opportunities. Following his remarks, Dr. Strohl will have a conversation with Robin Steans, president of Advance Illinois, about practices and policies from across the country aimed at increasing opportunities for good jobs.

Plus, Edith Njuguna, Director of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network, will share reflections on the Network's vision for 2026 and beyond.

Conference emcees:

- » Isabel Enad, Senior Community Engagement Associate, Advance Illinois
- » Paul Oliver, Community Affairs Specialist, Illinois Student Assistance Commission

10:15–10:25 A.M.

*Transition*

10:25–11:20 A.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

### ● ○ ○ A Glimpse Behind the Industry Curtain: Real-World Student Connections

MORAINÉ ROOM 1

Discover how Southern Illinois is building bridges between education and employment through its Regional Career Connections Calendar. This session will showcase innovative partnerships, hands-on career events, and immersive experiences, including A Day in the Trades, that empower students to explore high-demand fields such as healthcare, skilled trades, manufacturing, and more. Learn how schools, employers, and communities are working together to prepare the next generation for meaningful careers in their communities.

- » Deb Barnett, PhD, Executive Director, Southern Illinois Now
- » Kathy Lively, Education and Workforce Task Force Chair, Southern Illinois Now
- » Stephanie Robinson, CEO, ManTraCon
- » Josh Stafford, Superintendent, Vienna High School

### ● ○ ○ Direct Admission Illinois: A Collaborative Effort with a Statewide Impact

M210

Historic systemic inequities have widened educational attainment gaps for Black and Latinx communities. The Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Community College Board, and Illinois Student Assistance Commission each have a unique perspective of the community we serve, yet by working together and exchanging our ideas on how we define that term, we are building a direct admission process designed to meet the needs of all Illinois students. Come learn how these agencies are collaborating to bring the dream of a college education to all Illinois students.

- » Eddie Brambila, Managing Director of College Access Systems
- » Mark Mesle, Director of Student Access, Illinois Community College Board

- ○ ○ **Engaging Families in College and Career Pathways** M201

Effectively engaging families is essential to helping students make informed choices about their educational and career pathways. This session explores strategies and tools for communicating complex information about career pathways in clear, accessible, and culturally responsive ways. Participants will learn how to frame pathways in terms that resonate with families' values and aspirations and highlight opportunities for postsecondary success. The session will include examples of successful outreach materials, family engagement events, and partnerships that have strengthened understanding and support for college and career pathways.

  - » Lisa Dallacqua, PhD, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, Homewood Flossmoor High School
  - » Arleen Mercado, CTE Teacher, Waukegan Public Schools
  - » Jazlyn Staniel-Pulliam, Career Pathways Supervisor at East St. Louis Senior High School
  
- ● ○ **From Data to Action: Shaping Illinois' Workforce Future** MORAINÉ ROOM 2

What skills will Illinois workers need to thrive in 2031? Which industries are poised for growth, and how can we align education and training to meet the moment? This interactive session invites participants to explore the latest projections for Illinois' labor market over the next decade. Through small-group discussions, attendees will analyze Illinois-specific data on job growth and transformation across key sectors, identify emerging education and credentialing needs for high-demand occupations, and collaborate on strategies to close skills gaps and expand access to training.

  - » Jeff Strohl, PhD, Research Professor & Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
  
- ○ ○ **Keeping Pace with Federal Shifts: Responding to Changes for Illinois Students** MORAINÉ ROOM 3

Federal education policy is shifting fast—and Illinois educators, policymakers, and advocates need to stay one step ahead. This session will unpack how federal decisions are reshaping education across the continuum. Learn how federal funding works—and how this administration's education policies have changed budgets from early childhood education and care through postsecondary. We'll look at norm-shattering grant cancellations, new strategies to pressure institutions to conform to executive preference, and the long-term effects of policy changes. Participants will learn which key grants have been cancelled in Illinois and which grants to look out for. We'll examine some executive orders, Department of Education investigations, and litigation strategies used to encourage overcompliance in K-12 districts and higher education. Finally, we'll share practical steps Illinois stakeholders can take to stay informed about how their district, institution of higher education, or child care providers are being affected by recent developments.

  - » Leticia Mercado, Policy Associate, Advance Illinois
  - » Jim O'Connor, Project Director, Advance Illinois
  
- ● ○ **Supporting Students with Disabilities To and Through Their Postsecondary Journeys: A Learning Case Workshop** M202–204

Join the To&Through Project in a workshop where we will read and discuss our latest learning case, "A Seat at the Table: A Perspective on College Pathways for Students with Disabilities." Our learning cases are real stories of practitioners grappling with the complex challenges of post-secondary advising and support. Through reading and collaborative discussion of the case, participants will build empathy for the experiences of students with IEPs and the school counselors supporting them as they navigate college pathways, will collaborate with others on potential ideas and promising practices to create more inclusive experiences for students with IEPs in college planning, and will walk away with a resource they can take back to their organizations and school communities. The To&Through Project is a research/practice partnership at the Kersten Institute at the University of Chicago focused on bringing qualitative and quantitative data to practitioners and education stakeholders for inquiry and impact. We work to improve equitable outcomes and experiences for Chicago Public Schools students from middle grades through college completion.

  - » Dominique McKoy, Executive Director, UChicago To&Through Project
  - » Alexandra Ritson, Director of Learning & Engagement, UChicago To&Through Project

11:30 A.M.–12:25 P.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

- ● ○ **A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding and Improving Chronic Absenteeism** MORaine ROOM 1

Chronic absenteeism impedes academic achievement, social-emotional development, and long-term student success, which impacts college and career readiness. This interactive session offers a holistic exploration of the factors contributing to chronic absenteeism and practical strategies for addressing it. Together, we will explore cross-sector partnerships that cultivate consistent attendance for all students.

  - » Mariana Barragan Torres, PhD, Senior Research Specialist, Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative at University of Illinois
  - » Kari Harris, Network Capacity Coach, Illinois Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Network
  - » Antoinette Taylor, Founder, A. T. Exceptional Consulting
  
- ● ○ **Bridging the Gap: Cross-Sector Collaboration for Student Success** M201

Student success is a shared responsibility, and when K–12 schools, colleges, employers, and community-based organizations collaborate, the results can be transformative. This session spotlights two Leadership Communities that bring together cross-sector leaders to expand opportunities for learners. Presenters will share how they built innovative partnerships to prepare students for postsecondary success, highlighting key achievements and lessons learned. Whether you're an educator, workforce strategist, or nonprofit partner, you'll gain practical insights and replicable models to strengthen collaboration and improve outcomes, especially for students who are furthest from opportunity.

  - » Shavina Baker, Room to Grow Project Lead, Northern Illinois University
  - » Andrew Martin, Career Pathways Navigator, Highland Community College
  - » Nick Chatterton, Director, EFE #400 and the College Express Program
  - » Jodi Ingram, Workforce Education Director, Vermilion Advantage
  
- ● ○ **Dual Credit through Intercampus Collaboration** M210

Equitable access is part of our core mission. We recognize that students may face barriers preventing equitable access to education. For Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC), this includes dual-credit courses for rural students. Learn how IECC addresses this issue by implementing synchronous lecture halls across our four campuses and 16 local high schools to bring dual-credit instruction to rural high school students. In addition, IECC hosts annual dual-credit summits for high school faculty and orientations for parents/students.

  - » Cyndi Boyce, Dean of Instruction, Arts, Social Sciences, Education, and Public Service, IECC
  - » Erin Volk, Director, Dual Credit, IECC
  
- ○ ○ **From Classroom to Career: Navigating Postsecondary Futures with Artificial Intelligence** MORaine ROOM 2

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the future of work, creating new opportunities and challenges for today's students. In this session, we will explore fun and practical ways to teach AI literacy and demonstrate how these tools are already being used in schools and various industries. We will also discuss current and pending legislation, business trends, and economic changes that will impact our classrooms and workforce development efforts. You will learn strategies to help you support students in pursuing postsecondary pathways that lead to economic mobility.

  - » Eric Santos, Regional Educational Technology Coordinator, The Illinois Learning Technology Center

● ● ○ **Illinois' Apprenticeship Expansion Framework: Systems Building for Career-Connected Learning**

MORAINÉ ROOM 3

Illinois is making significant strides in building a statewide apprenticeship ecosystem grounded in cross-sector collaboration and shared responsibility among education, workforce, and employer partners. This session will introduce the Apprenticeship Expansion Framework and highlight the emerging supports and tools stakeholders around the state are designing to help expand apprenticeships as sustainable pathways within secondary and post-secondary learning. We will discuss practical approaches to business engagement, how to connect with local workforce partners, Apprenticeship Specialists, and Intermediaries, and funding opportunities that can reduce startup and implementation barriers. We will also explore how apprenticeship pathways can lead individuals into high-demand occupations and careers that provide family-sustaining wages. Participants will be invited to help shape the statewide infrastructure to ensure apprenticeship works for schools, students, and businesses across Illinois.

- » Justin Arnold, PhD, Director, East Central Illinois Workforce Board
- » Jennifer Foil, PhD, Director of Policy and Programs, Workforce Policy Lab at NIU and Illinois Workforce Innovation Board

● ○ ○ **Understanding Young People's Perceptions of College**

M202-204

Join us as we share new research from the Illinois Center for Education Equity at Chicago State University exploring what drives, and deters, the next generation of college students. Discover what today's students think about the value and accessibility of higher education, their ambitions for the future, and how institutions can better support those who feel uncertain or disengaged about attending college.

- » Meghan McShan, Research Assistant, Chicago State University

12:25-12:35 P.M.

*Transition*

12:35-2:00 P.M.

**Luncheon Plenary**

ILLINOIS BALLROOM

● ○ ○ **Our Data, Our Stories: Connecting Dashboard Data to Student Experience**

Hear from our Success Network Student Advisory Council members as they share their analysis of college and career readiness metrics in their own districts. Learn how these student leaders examined quantitative indicators such as graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment and combined them with qualitative insights from focus groups to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The session will highlight students' perspectives on how to better support their readiness for life after high school and provide ideas for involving students in data-driven decision-making to foster a culture of shared accountability for college and career success.

- » Tawasol Adam, Student, North Chicago Community High School
- » Ayesha Camara, Student, South Shore International College Preparatory
- » Gracyn Horn, Student, Vienna High School
- » Paige Jackson, Student, Moline High School
- » Ana Moya, Manager, Professional Learning Communities, Illinois Student Assistance Commission
- » Daniela Villegas, Student, North Chicago Community High School

2:15–3:10 P.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

- ● ○ **Accelerating Opportunity: Current Illinois Dual Credit Policy, Resources, and Guidance** HUMANITIES ROOM

In Illinois, dual credit is a cornerstone strategy within a broader movement to make college more affordable, relevant, and accessible, accelerating thousands of students statewide toward postsecondary success. The Dual Credit Quality Act, amended most recently in June 2025, anchors the state’s dual credit policy and reflects the state’s commitment to local partnerships scaling rigorous, high-quality, and strategic dual credit courses. State leaders (ISBE, ICCB, and ILACEP) will share details about the current state of dual credit policy in Illinois, highlighting new and emerging resources, guidance, and administrative rules, to help participants improve their local dual credit efforts.

  - » Jason Helfer, PhD, Special Advisor to the State Superintendent, Illinois State Board of Education
  - » Myka Kennedy, Assistant Director of Postsecondary Success, School District U-46, and President, Illinois Alliance for Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships
  - » Adrienne Pickett, PhD, Senior Director for Academic Innovation and Partnerships, Illinois Community College Board
  - » Emily Rusca, Director of Policy, Education Systems Center at NIU
  
- ● ○ **Aligning Illinois Programs of Study to the Modernized Career Cluster Framework** MORaine ROOM 1

Illinois currently operates with two complementary frameworks guiding career and technical education and postsecondary transitions. To ensure consistency and stronger alignment with workforce needs, Education Systems Center at NIU, in partnership with the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois State Board of Education, is developing a unified model that integrates the Illinois Model Programs of Study Guides and ISBE CTE Model Programs of Study. This session will share the collaborative process and stakeholder engagement strategies, and solicit feedback.

  - » Meagan Mitchell, PhD, Pathways Director, Education Systems Center at NIU
  - » Laura Monteagudo, Pathways Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU
  
- ● ○ **Campus Resilience and Student Supports After Federal Policy Shifts** MORaine ROOM 3

This session explores how colleges and universities are navigating federal policy changes impacting students, staff, and campus efforts to foster inclusive access, equitable outcomes, belonging, and student success in their education and career goals. Participants will hear about a variety of approaches and solutions that institutions are using to support students’ and staff’s well-being.

  - » Davon Maxey, Financial Aid Counselor, University of St. Frances
  - » Sam Nelson, Director, Organizational Development, Illinois Student Assistance Commission
  
- ● ● **High School Internships Utilizing Construction Projects** M210

Discover how Peoria Schools, Oak Park River Forest High School District, River Bend School District, and Veregy have transformed school construction and renovation projects into immersive “Live Learning Labs.” These initiatives offer students hands-on experiences in STEM and Construction Management by integrating real-world applications into their educational environment. Learn how these districts leveraged partnerships and infrastructure upgrades—such as geothermal systems, solar installations, EV technology, and new building construction—to create impactful internship programs that prepare students for future careers in engineering, sustainability, and the trades.

  - » Darryl Hogue, Superintendent at River Bend School District
  - » Michele James, Senior Sales Account Executive at Veregy

●○○ **The Role of School Counselors in Advancing Career Pathways** M201

School counselors are essential in helping students understand what it means to be on a career pathway and what it takes to complete one successfully. This session will explore practical strategies counselors can use to help students connect their interests to pathways, interpret labor market information, and make informed course and credential decisions. Participants will also discuss effective collaboration with educators and partners to ensure students stay on track and fully benefit from pathway opportunities.

- » LaShanna Clark, Professional School Counselor, Rich Township High School District 227
- » Emily Owen, High School Counselor, Belvidere Community Unit School District 100

●○○ **The State We're In: A Report on Public Education in Illinois** M202–204

Advance Illinois produces a biennial report on Illinois' educational performance from early childhood through postsecondary. The report tracks key metrics related to enrollment and access, learning conditions, and outcomes over the last 15 years, with a special focus on how the state is progressing post-pandemic. Join us for a presentation on the most recent report and a round-table discussion on the state's progress and what this might mean for schools, districts, and the state moving forward.

- » Kelsey Bakken, Director of Policy, Advance Illinois

3:10–3:20 P.M.

*Transition*

3:20–4:15 P.M.

## Concurrent Sessions

●○○ **Building a Shared Practice of Data Use** M201

This session introduces participants to an inclusive approach to data use, bringing data together in unique ways that allow participants to better understand the policies and practices they are implementing. We will start with the key questions participants want to ask about their systems, identifying analyses and data that support continuous improvement. We will demonstrate how leveraging secure, cloud-based technologies and collaborating with partners through data identification and legal processes can enable powerful insights. The presentation will include examples from work with the Rockford Research Collaborative, state agencies focused on transitional instruction, and college and career pathways projects. Presenters will also discuss how the Success Network Dashboard can serve as an entry point to data conversations for districts and colleges.

- » Benjamin Boer, Sr. Director of Data, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Kate Eischens, Data Project Coordinator, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Dominique Janvier, Data Analyst, Education Systems Center at NIU

●●○ **Collaborative Efforts to Increase Holistic Student Supports** MORaine ROOM 2

At the same time as funding for barrier-reduction supports dwindles, and the social safety net unravels, students' need for housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other supports grows. Along with the National Skills Coalition, under the umbrella of the Lumina FutureReady States Initiative, Women Employed is convening stakeholders to create a framework for holistic student supports in Illinois. This will lead to a policy and strategic action plan to ensure more learners have the support they need to earn workforce credentials that make them better off economically. Women Employed welcomes collaboration from partners throughout the state to move this effort to reduce barriers to student support funding forward. Join this session to learn about what role you can play in supporting this effort.

- » Dawn Koeltzow, Senior Director for Workforce Equity Management, Illinois Central College
- » Deana Schenk, Senior Director for Student Success, Illinois Community College Board
- » Christina Warden, Vice President of Policy and Programs, Women Employed
- » Matt Weis, President, National Able Network

● ○ ○ **Innovative Practices and Collaborations in Early Childhood To Support Postsecondary Attainment**

M202-204

During this session, attendees will have the opportunity to learn more about the new Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC) and the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (convened by the Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board) and efforts to increase postsecondary attainment for the early childhood workforce and those interested in entering the field. A panel will discuss some productive and innovative approaches they have implemented, including competency-based pathways, seamless articulation, community college and four-year partnerships, and dual credit to ensure a robust, well-prepared early childhood workforce for Illinois.

- » Christi Chadwick, Project Director, Workforce Illinois Department of Early Childhood
- » Lauri Marmorstone, Early Childhood Support Specialist, Harper College
- » Rebecca J. Pruitt, Associate Professor of Education and Director of Early Childhood Education, Lewis University
- » Yadira Ramirez, Academic Advisor and Recruitment Coordinator, School of Teaching & Learning, Illinois State University
- » Linda Ruhe Marsh, EdD, Senior Associate Director of Early Childhood Programs, Illinois Board of Higher Education

● ● ○ **The Trade Collective: Creating Awareness and Opportunities in the Skilled Trades**

MORAINÉ ROOM 3

In the next 10 years, an estimated 41% of the 6 million skilled trades professionals are expected to leave the workforce nationwide. This is a crisis that has been developing for many years and is now directly in front of our country and our communities. The Trade Collective was established in early 2024 to provide career awareness opportunities for high school students interested in the skilled trades and get them “Trade Ready” for entry into those careers when they graduate. We “Light the Fire” in our young people and show them that a 4-year college path is not the only path to a successful life. Our model approaches the problem of the dwindling population of skilled trades professionals as one of supply and demand. The supply is the high school students in Evanston. The demand is the local companies’ need for skilled trade professionals. We work with Evanston Township High School (ETHS) at all grade levels and, together, bring interested students along on a journey that leads to a career in the skilled trades.

- » Neil Gambow, Founder and Director of Operations, Trade Collective
- » Dale Leibforth, Director of Early College and Career Experiences, Evanston Township High School
- » Tris O’Shaughnessy, Executive Director, Trade Collective

● ○ ○ **Where Policy Meets Practice: Policy Updates and Emerging Challenges**

MORAINÉ ROOM 1

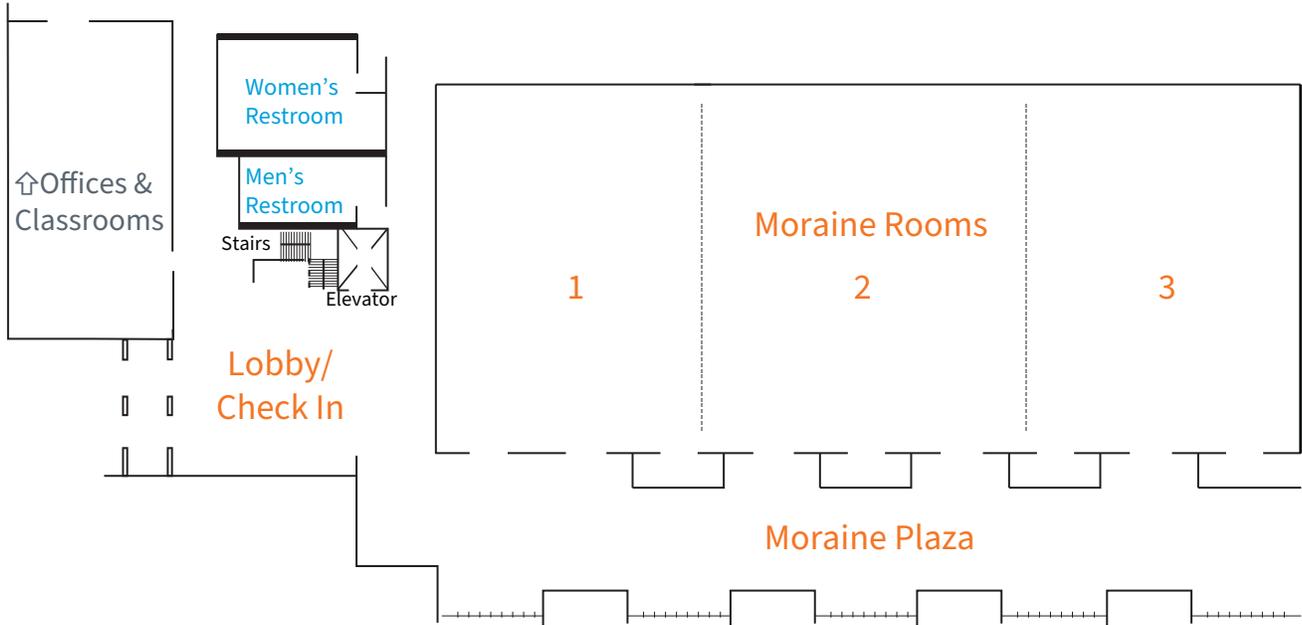
Join this session to learn how recent state college and career readiness policy changes and emerging priorities can shape how partners across Illinois can serve their communities to achieve more equitable outcomes in secondary, postsecondary, and beyond. Participants will also engage in a deeper dive discussion into challenges and opportunities in learners’ ability to meet the multi-layered high school graduation requirements in the state.

- » Madeleine Greene, Policy Manager, Education Systems Center at NIU
- » Emily Rusca, Policy Director, Education Systems Center at NIU

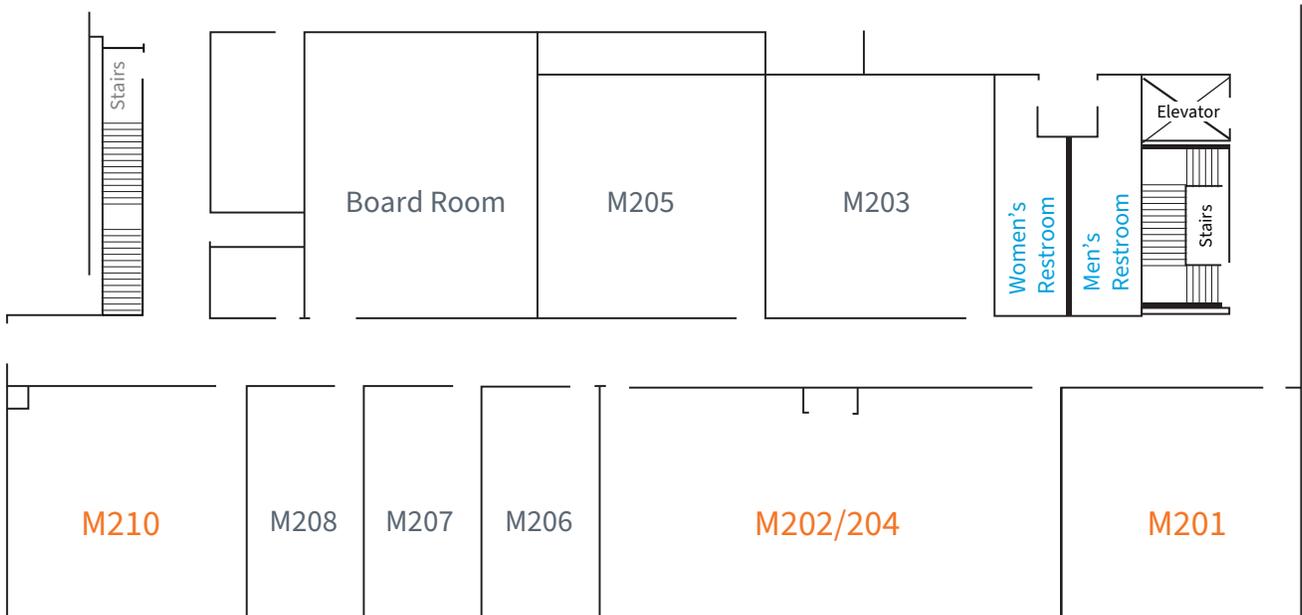
# ROOM MAP

Moraine Valley Community College  
Business and Conference Center, Building M

## First Floor



## Second Floor



# SPEAKERS

**Tawasol Adam** Tawasol is a senior at North Chicago Community High School. At school, she is involved in clubs including NHS, Yearbook, and Black Student Union, and has participated in basketball and track. Tawasol is an active member in her community and volunteer at her local elementary school. She likes building genuine relationships with those around her and is excited to start her new journey of becoming a student at Carleton College, where she will major in Biology on the pre-dental track.

**Justin Arnold, PhD** Justin is the director of the East Central Illinois Workforce Board and president of the Illinois Workforce Association, the state association of local workforce boards. In these roles, he champions leadership and collective impact across workforce, education, and economic development.

**Shavina Baker** Shavina serves as the director of the Room to Grow Project. Northern Illinois University was awarded the United States Department of Education's four-year Rural Postsecondary Education Grant, partnering with Highland Community College and ROE 8. The four-year grant aims to increase the number of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in the region who successfully move from high school to community college and, from there, to bachelor's degree completion. Before becoming an educator, Shavina worked in the insurance industry, bringing additional workplace experience to her work. Shavina has extensive leadership experience as a former principal. Additionally, she has developed and led professional learning and worked extensively with curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

**Kelsey Bakken** Kelsey Bakken is an education professional with experience in both classroom teaching and state-level education policy. She spent seven years teaching special education at a high school in Chicago's Gage Park neighborhood, where she helped build a transition program to ensure all students had access to the resources and opportunities needed to develop college and career readiness skills. Motivated by a commitment to equity and access, Kelsey earned a master's degree in Education Policy and Management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She later joined the Illinois State Board of Education's research department, where she led and supported projects to improve educational outcomes statewide. Her work included the Evidence-Based Funding Five-Year Evaluative Study, bilingual educator supply and demand analysis, statewide implementation of trauma-informed practices, and evaluation of the new Black History curriculum. She also advised on the evaluation of Learning Renewal programs, helping to use data to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Illinois schools. Most recently, as a policy advisor and now director of policy at Advance Illinois, Kelsey leads the organization's work on education funding across K-12 and higher education and oversees the team's biennial "State We're In" report.

**Deborah Barnett, PhD** Deborah (Deb) earned her doctoral and master's degrees in Workforce Education and Development from Southern Illinois University Carbondale and holds a bachelor's in Business Administration. She serves as executive director of Southern Illinois Now (SI Now), a 17-county regional economic development initiative focused on business growth, regional marketing, and workforce development. SI Now's Education and Workforce Task Force launched the Southern Illinois Region Leadership Community through the Illinois Education and Career Success Network. Previously, Deb spent over a decade at SIU Carbondale in student, academic, and external affairs. She also brings ten years of small business ownership experience and has worked in workforce training, elementary education, and ministry service. She actively advances regional growth alongside industry and education partners and was appointed to the SIU Board of Trustees by Governor Pritzker in August 2025. As a lifelong resident of southern Illinois, Deb is passionate about contributing to collaborative efforts to advance the region she serves.

**Mariana Barragan Torres, PhD** Mariana is an experienced education researcher with interest in the measurement and evaluation of educational outcomes and policies, especially those related to student outcomes (cognitive and non-cognitive), teacher preparation and teaching quality, and postsecondary transitions. Mariana has a PhD in Education (Social Research Methods) from UCLA, a Master of Arts in Comparative Education from Stanford University, and a Master of Science and Bachelor's degree in Economics from ITAM. At IWERC, she leads the learning renewal team and collaborates on projects related to post-secondary enrollment trends in Illinois, teacher preparation programs, and the challenges and opportunities faced by Latino students pursuing higher education. Mariana enjoys collaborating with experts and stakeholders to address their educational questions and thrives on building partnerships across the state.

**Ben Boer** Benjamin (Ben) leads the data portfolio at Education Systems Center at NIU, which includes the Success Network Dashboard, regional data collaboratives, and data support for projects. He also provides support on policy issues, including school finance, assessment, accountability, and data use. In past roles, Ben has provided analytical and modeling support for numerous K–12 funding proposals, the development of integrated data systems, and accountability approaches. This work was integral in the development of evidence-based funding, the Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act, and the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act. Ben is currently working with Chicago Public Schools on the redesign of their accountability system. Ben is a PhD candidate in educational policy studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He focuses on the use of data in schools and its impact on school culture. He holds a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in computer science from Brown University, and a master’s degree in public policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago. He sits on the board of Chicago Run, an organization that brings running programs to underserved schools in CPS.

**Cyndi Boyce** Cyndi has been with Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC) since 2006. She began as an adjunct professor of History, then became an assistant professor in 2012 and an associate professor in 2022. In February 2023, she was appointed dean of instruction at Lincoln Trail College. Following the 2024 district merger, she now serves as the dean of instruction for arts, social sciences, education, and public service across all four IECC campuses—Frontier Community College, Lincoln Trail College, Olney Central College, and Wabash Valley College. As a faculty member, Cyndi received the Excellence in Teaching Award, the Faculty Excellence Award, and the Staff Excellence Award. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a Master of Arts in History from Indiana State University. Cyndi serves on the Faculty Advisory Council to the Illinois Board of Higher Education as the two-year institution caucus chair, a position she has held since 2017. She also contributed to the Illinois College Course Materials Affordability and Equitable Access Task Force (CCM Task Force) in 2021–22. In her role as dean, she serves as the DERA contact for IECC and chairs the IECC Equity Plan Committee. Cyndi also serves on the Crawford County Board, elected in November 2024 to a two-year term.

**Eddie Brambila** Eduardo (Eddie) is the managing director of college access systems at the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. After serving in the U.S. Army and attending Mt. San Antonio College, Eddie accidentally started his career in college access in East Los Angeles, where he supported students at Roosevelt High School with college applications and the FAFSA while completing his studies at California State University–Los Angeles. Eddie joined ISAC in 2001 and shortly later completed graduate studies in Applied Linguistics at the University of Illinois Chicago, focusing on pragmatics and second language acquisition. He leads statewide systems work grounded in human-centered design and collaborates with local, state, and national partners—including NCAN, ISBE, IBHE, and ICCB—to advance equitable postsecondary access.

**Ayesha Camara** Ayesha is a junior attending South Shore International College Preparatory. At school, Ayesha is the treasurer for her school’s HOSA chapter, a multi-sport athlete (volleyball, basketball, and softball), and an academically driven student. Outside of school, Ayesha enjoys being herself, shopping, trying new things, and spending time with close friends and family.

**Christi Chadwick** Christi has spent over 25 years focused on advancing high-quality early learning opportunities for young children, particularly those from under-resourced communities. She currently serves as the project director for workforce at the new Department of Early Childhood. Previously, Christi directed ECACE, an initiative to provide seamless higher education pathways and holistic supports for the early childhood workforce to access degrees and credentials. Christi has also worked on issues related to developing, strengthening, and better compensating the early childhood workforce in Illinois and Colorado, including as the workforce development policy director in the Illinois Governor’s Office for Early Childhood Development and as the early learning policy director in the City of Chicago Mayor’s Office.

**Nick Chatterton** Nicholas (Nick) is the director of Education for Employment System #400 and the College Express program at Danville Area Community College. In this role, he leads CTE initiatives across Vermilion County, coordinating partnerships among local school districts, industry leaders, and higher education institutions. Nick oversees Perkins and CTE funding, workforce development projects, and regional collaboration to expand access to high-quality programs in healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and emerging technologies. Under his leadership, the Vermilion Vocational Education Delivery System has implemented innovative career exploration experiences, including virtual reality simulations through Transfr headsets and work-based learning opportunities that connect students directly with local employers. Nick is passionate about helping students discover and pursue rewarding career pathways that strengthen both their futures and the regional workforce.

**LaShanna Clark** With over 18 years of dedicated experience as a professional school counselor, LaShanna has made it her life's work to support, guide, and empower students to reach their fullest potential. She began her career in Chicago Public Schools, where she served for nine years—most notably as the Counseling department chair, providing comprehensive services to students across both Chicago's city and suburban communities. A proud graduate of Rust College, an HBCU, LaShanna holds a bachelor's degree in English. She earned a master's degree in school counseling from Lewis University and a master's in educational leadership from Governors State University. Her educational journey and professional experience reflect her unwavering belief that all students and families deserve equitable access to high-quality education and resources, regardless of their circumstances. Currently, LaShanna serves as the Business Academy counselor for grades 10–12 and dual enrollment coordinator at the FAC campus at Rich Township High School, where she supports students navigating the non-traditional pathway program. Her commitment to student success is rooted in a lifelong passion for counseling and a genuine desire to help scholars discover and exceed their potential. A native of Frankfort, Illinois, LaShanna now resides with her husband and daughter in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. Outside of her professional role, she enjoys traveling the world with her family and focusing on the moments that matter most.

**Lisa Marie Dallacqua, PhD** Lisa is an experienced educational leader with two decades of service in teaching, school leadership, and district administration, and she currently serves as the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional learning at Homewood-Flossmoor High School. In this role, she leads major district initiatives, including the expansion of college and career pathways, development of the IB Career-Related Programme, and the alignment of curriculum and professional learning to promote equitable postsecondary readiness for all students. Her prior leadership roles in Township High School District 113 and East Aurora School District 131 included oversight of curriculum, assessment, development of college and career pathways, multilingual education, MTSS, and large-scale professional learning systems. A former principal and educator in Chicago Public Schools, Lisa also serves as an adjunct professor at DePaul University in the College of Education and presents nationally on curriculum design, dual language education, and instructional equity.

**Kate Eischens** Kate supports collaborative data initiatives at Education Systems Center at NIU. Since joining the team in a consulting role in early 2025, Kate has helped manage cross-agency timelines, engage partners, and lead key deliverables, most notably authoring the ILDS Guidebook to support long-term system clarity, governance, and coordination. Previously, Kate worked at Chicago Public Schools in the Chief Education Office, where she supported academic strategy and districtwide data reporting. She earned a bachelor's degree in Social Policy from Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy.

**Isabel Enad** Isabel was born and raised in the north suburbs of Chicago before completing her undergraduate degrees in Political Geography and Spanish at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Through professional experience in the nonprofit education sector, Isabel found a passion for addressing structural inequities in the education system, prompting her to complete her graduate degree in Higher Education Administration and Policy at Northwestern University. Her research focused on financial literacy of student loan debt among BIPOC student populations. Most recently, she served as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program coordinator in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan.

**Jennifer Foil, PhD** Jennifer is director of policy and programs for the Workforce Policy Lab at Northern Illinois University, where she leads statewide strategies to strengthen Illinois' workforce systems. Since 2016, she has supported work-based learning and apprenticeship expansion through policy, governance, and system-building work across agencies in partnership with the Illinois Workforce Innovation Board and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. Jennifer's work focuses on translating research and policy into clear, actionable strategies that align education, workforce, and industry to expand socio-economic opportunity. Outside of work, Jennifer is the current vice president of the Board of Directors for the Chicago Area Runners Association (CARA), where she also co-chairs the Outreach and Inclusion Committee.

**Neil Gambow** A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Neil's long business career has included executive positions with numerous engineered product companies, including BFGoodrich, Halma Group, and Kelso Technologies USA. In 2018, Neil was appointed by the mayor of Evanston, Illinois, to lead the new Mayor's Employer Advisory Council (MEAC), a volunteer organization founded to connect Evanston Township High School students with local jobs that do not require a college degree. As chair, Neil worked closely with Evanston employers and the high school to identify career pathways for students who do not go to or finish college. MEAC now boasts 154 members, including 65 employees representing jobs in health care, manufacturing, and the industrial trades. Neil's work with MEAC made him an Evanston leader in the postsecondary planning and workforce development space, and a natural ally of the mission and work of the Trade Collective, which he joined in early 2024. Neil lives in Evanston with his wife of 50+ years.

**Madeleine Greene** Madeleine supports Education Systems Center at NIU’s policy work, largely focusing on transitional instruction, dual enrollment, and college and career pathways. Madeleine facilitates a bidirectional policy approach by convening practitioners in forums such as the Illinois Education and Career Success Network’s Policy Committee to inform equitable policy at each stage of the P-20 pipeline. Madeleine began her career as a middle school teacher in Gary, Indiana, and in Chicago Public Schools, where she developed a passion for eliminating systemic barriers to student success. Most recently, Madeleine supported research and analysis into transfer pathways at the Partnership for College Completion as well as equitable higher education funding work with Advance Illinois. Madeleine holds a bachelor’s in journalism from Northwestern University and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Chicago.

**Kari Harris** Kari is a coach for the Illinois MTSS Network at Northern Illinois University, bringing extensive building- and district-level experience in professional development and school improvement. She also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in education. Kari holds a BS from Western Michigan University, an MEd from DePaul University, and an MA in Illinois Principal Preparation from Concordia University Chicago. She maintains an Illinois Professional Educator License with endorsements in elementary and secondary education, reading specialist, learning behavior specialist, learning disabilities, social sciences, and principal.

**Jason Helfer, PhD** Jason currently serves as the special advisor to the state superintendent at the Illinois State Board of Education. Previously, he was an associate professor and department chair at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Jason has taught at Millikin University, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and as an elementary school teacher in Evanston, Illinois and Grapevine-Colleyville, Texas.

**Darryl Hogue, EdD** Darryl has worked in the River Bend Schools since 2014. As a former Navy Hospital Corpsman, his goal has always been to provide hands-on learning opportunities that support career choices. His efforts created a wealth of real-world learning opportunities for the students and communities that River Bend serves. He has supported the Success Network since 2015 and continues to work to create more opportunities for students and employers.

**Gracyn Horn** Gracyn is a senior at Vienna High School. She is the oldest of two children and the first planning to attend a university. Throughout high school, she has stayed dedicated to her education while participating in 4-H, Pep Club, Beta Club, and the Future Educators Club. These experiences have strengthened her leadership skills and passion for working with children. For the past two years, she has had the opportunity to observe a first-grade teacher in a classroom setting, an experience that has confirmed her desire to pursue a career in education

**Jodi Ingram** Jodie serves as the workforce education director for Vermilion Advantage, where she leads the Vermilion County Workforce Education (VCWE) initiative, a collaborative effort bringing together industry, education, and community to strengthen the local talent pipeline. Jodie partners with schools, employers, and organizations to create hands-on career experiences. Guided by the VCWE mission—*We Educate. We Support. We Grow.*—Jodie is passionate about helping every student in Vermilion County discover meaningful local career pathways and graduate future ready.

**Paige Jackson** Paige is a junior at Moline High School in Moline, Illinois, where she plays in four orchestras and three bands, is the captain of the Color Guard and Winter Guard, and is the CTE program ambassador. Outside of school, Paige works at Fareway, participates in community theater, and plays in multiple bands. After Paige graduates, she plans to major in music.

**Michele James** Michele, a senior sales account executive for Veregy, holds degrees from Purdue University, Concordia University Chicago, and Governors State University and is currently pursuing a PhD in Organizational Leadership. She enjoys volunteering and serving the community in her spare time through civic organizations.

**Dominique Janvier** Dominique is committed to investigating educational equity gaps through evidence-based policy, advocacy, and program implementation. She is a data analyst at Education Systems Center at NIU, where she supports the work of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network’s data dashboard. Previously, she worked for Braven, where she led the programmatic outcomes data collection and analysis for the Braven Accelerator Course. Dominique started her career in education as a teaching assistant with the Teaching Assistant Program in France (TAPIF), where she taught English at the middle school level. Dominique has a Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy Studies and a minor in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of Chicago.

**Myka Kennedy** Myka is an educator and advocate with more than twenty years of experience across secondary, postsecondary, and district-level education and currently serves as assistant director of postsecondary success, overseeing early college programming and career pathways for School District U-46. She holds a bachelor's degree in Biological and Physical Sciences, a master's degree in Counseling, and a second master's in School Leadership. Her work as a teacher, counselor, and administrator centers on student access, authentic connection, and the creation of inclusive educational spaces. Myka has been actively involved with the Illinois Association of Concurrent Enrollment Programs (ILACEP) for six years and currently serves as president, bringing a strong passion for policy work focused on strengthening concurrent enrollment systems, advancing equity, and expanding high-quality pathways for students across Illinois.

**Dawn Koeltzow** Dawn serves as senior director for workforce equity management at Illinois Central College. She works closely with the Illinois Community College Board and the leadership at Illinois Central College to guide the success of the statewide Workforce Empowerment Initiative (WEI). The program serves historically underrepresented individuals and 20 colleges participate on the grant. To date, over 19,000 Illinoisans have received critical supportive services to complete high demand workforce training credentials. For this project, Dawn leads college consortium services, including coaching, evaluation, advocacy, community of practice webinars, equity trainings, consortium meetings/symposium, statewide marketing, and outcomes reporting. Previously, Dawn was a passionate leader for cooperative education. She served as the director of the Springer Center for Internships at Bradley University and championed required experiential learning for students. Dawn has a master's degree in Human Services Administration from Bradley University and a bachelor's degree in Finance from Arizona State University.

**Dale Leibforth** Dale has worked at Evanston Township High School for the past 29 years. He spent his first 17 years in the math classroom and then served as math department chair for 10 years. He currently serves as the ETHS director of early college and career experiences. During his time at ETHS, he has implemented detracked math courses, transdisciplinary learning, and data science as well as increased awareness, access, readiness and success in Advanced Placement and dual credit courses, particularly for our students of color. He has developed work-based learning, career experiences and community and business partnerships, with a focus on students who do not plan to attend a 2- or 4-year university. Recently, he has worked to develop strong partnerships that provide a clear pathway for students interested in the skilled trades. He has worked with districts across the country to help them implement similar programs for their students.

**Kathy Lively** Kathy is a veteran workforce and education leader with more than 30 years of experience connecting training programs to regional workforce needs. She previously served as CEO of MAN-TRA-CON Corporation and as associate dean of adult basic and secondary education at John A. Logan College, where she strengthened adult learning and career pathways. Now a consultant, Kathy supports organizations in grant development, partnership building, and program design to better prepare students and adults for successful careers. She remains an active regional collaborator supporting education and workforce alignment.

**Lauri Marmorstone** Lauri is an early childhood support specialist at Harper College, where she has spent the past five years supporting and mentoring the next generation of early childhood educators. In addition to her support role at Harper, she's also spent the past 19 years as an adjunct early childhood education instructor, sharing her expertise and commitment to developmentally appropriate practice with emerging professionals. Lauri began her career as a preschool and Kindergarten teacher before moving into leadership as a center director, experiences that continue to inform her work with both students and faculty. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Illinois State University and a Master of Education in Early Childhood Education from National Louis University. Lauri is deeply committed to supporting students as they move through each stage of their academic journey. She collaborates with students to strengthen their academic skills, build persistence in their programs, and make informed transfer decisions that align with their long-term goals. Through individualized guidance, Lauri helps students develop their professional identities, gain confidence, and prepare for meaningful opportunities beyond Harper.

**Andrew Martin** Andrew serves as the career pathways navigator at Highland Community College in Freeport, Illinois, where he supports schools and community partners in their college and career readiness efforts across Illinois' three northwesternmost counties. His position is the first of its kind at Highland and was produced by the Room to Grow Project, a grant-funded partnership between Northern Illinois University, Highland, and ROE 8. You can find him in his cozy campus office during the daytime or teaching GED courses to adult education students across the quad at night. A former Golden Apple Scholar, Andrew came to Highland from a position teaching 9th-grade English, 9th-grade career seminar, and 12th-grade transitional English at Freeport High School. He enjoys the challenge of cross-sector collaboration and is committed to helping drive regional change through all its ups and downs.

**Davon Maxey** Davon has worked in financial aid for six years, following his degree in Mass Media and Communications from Aurora University. Starting his career at ISAC, he worked with high school students on higher education planning and FAFSA completion. Afterward, he continued working with higher education students at the University of St. Francis as a financial aid counselor and became more involved with the ILASFAA professional association. Though his career is fairly new, he has connected with colleagues across the state and developed skills, including leadership training, contributing to the update of a legislative toolkit for the state, and serving as a co-chair of the ILASFAA Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

**Dominique McKoy** Dominique (Dom) is the executive director of The University of Chicago To&Through Project. Through his work, Dom aims to ensure education and community leaders in positions to affect student outcomes from the middle grades through college have access to high-quality quantitative and qualitative data to better understand student experiences and to inform the development of responsive student supports. As a leader, Dom is passionate about facilitating public dialogue and partnerships that focus on disrupting inequitable systems and developing postsecondary pathways that students can access with agency and dignity. He holds a Master of Arts in Public Policy from the University of Chicago's Harris School and a bachelor's degree from Kenyon College. Dom also serves on the board of Project OneTen, a Chicago-based mentoring program supporting young men of color in their transition to high school.

**Meghan McShan** Meghan is the research assistant at the Illinois Center for Education Equity at Chicago State University, where she manages research initiatives and collaborative partnerships aimed at addressing Illinois' decline in Black student enrollment. In her role, Meghan supports data-driven projects that explore the barriers and opportunities shaping access, persistence, and success for underrepresented students in higher education. She works closely with campus leaders, policymakers, and community partners to translate research into actionable strategies that advance equity across the state's education system. Meghan holds a bachelor's degree in Economics from Spelman College and a master's degree in Urban Planning and Policy with a concentration in economic development from the University of Illinois Chicago. Her interdisciplinary background informs her commitment to creating equitable educational and economic pathways for students and communities alike.

**Leticia Mercado** Born and raised in Los Angeles, Leticia is familiar with the struggles faced by low-income students in urban schools. Her experiences in these settings have pushed her to dedicate her career to fostering an equitable school system using data-driven interventions. Leticia graduated from the University of Chicago with a BA in Sociology, an MA in the Social Sciences, and a certificate in Education and Society. During her time in school, she was invested in understanding the complexities of the education system in both IL and across the nation. Leticia also devoted time to researching the experiences of dual language teachers in Southern California. Before coming to Advance, Leticia worked as a research assistant in an NIH-funded project seeking to identify patterns in interactions between CPD and male minority youths.

**Arleen Mercado** Arleen has worked in several high schools across Puerto Rico as a Business and Spanish teacher. During this time, she completed the credits and requirements necessary to earn a master's degree in Business Education at the Interamerican University of Puerto Rico. She moved to Illinois and began working as a Spanish Heritage teacher in Waukegan School District 60. Later, she transitioned into a Career and Technical Education (CTE) Business position at Waukegan High School. While teaching, she pursued a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Grand Canyon University. Today, she serves as the SkillsUSA Advisor and teaches Introduction to Business and Computer Applications. She is proud to see her students earning industry certifications and credentials through Certipoint, while also demonstrating leadership at conferences and competitions. Watching their growth and success reaffirms her lifelong commitment to education, leadership, and empowering future generations.

**Mark Mesle** Mark is the director for student access for the Illinois Community College Board. He collaborates with community colleges across the state to reduce enrollment barriers and put students in the best position to thrive. Mark has worked to support students facing housing insecurity, mental health issues, and overseen statewide efforts to ensure adult education learners have the language, civic and career support needed to be successful. Mark currently serves as the ICCB point person on the Direct Admissions initiative which designed to make the admissions process more accessible for Illinois students than ever before. Prior to working for ICCB, Mark spent ten years engaging new voices in the local democracy for the Cook County Clerk's office and five years organizing and training new National Park advocates for the National Parks Conservation Association.

**Meagan Mitchell, PhD** As pathways director at Education Systems Center at NIU, Meagan manages regional and statewide projects that support the implementation of high-quality college and career pathways. She has focused much of her career as a student affairs practitioner in higher education, creating university-wide student retention initiatives, decreasing students' time to college completion, and enhancing various program curricula. Meagan holds a doctorate in curriculum studies from DePaul University and a master's degree in higher education student affairs from Indiana University.

**Laura Montegudo** As pathways manager at Education Systems Center at NIU, Laura supports communities across Illinois through the Scaling Transformative Advanced Manufacturing Pathways and Community College Pathway Equity and Currency projects, as well as statewide initiatives to support alignment with the Model Programs of Study Guides. With a background in college admissions, Laura has worked with many first-generation and low-income college students as they navigate the transition from high school to college. Through this work, Laura developed a passion for racial equity and helping students overcome barriers. She first joined Education Systems Center as the policy manager, and her transition to the pathways team builds on that knowledge and experience while deepening her direct work with communities across Illinois. Laura holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and a Master of Public Administration from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

**Ana Moya** Ana is a first-generation college student and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminology from Dominican University. She joined the Illinois Student Assistance Commission as an ISACorps member for the Triton Community College District, where she found her passion for working with first-generation college students and Spanish-speaking parents. Before joining the professional development team at ISAC, Ana served as an ISACorps regional coordinator for the south and west suburbs. She currently resides in the west suburbs of Chicago and enjoys the short commute to coffee shops on the weekend and dog parks for morning walks with Dakota.

**Sam Nelson** Sam is the director of capacity management for the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. Sam has worked in higher education for over 30 years. Prior to joining ISAC in 1993, he worked in the financial aid office at North Central College. In his current role at ISAC, he works as a network weaver with stakeholders from multiple sectors across Illinois on their participation in the College Changes Everything® movement to support the state's goal to increase the percentage of Illinois adults with high-quality degrees, certificates, and credentials. His work helps partners and communities increase their ability to support students' postsecondary and career exploration, preparation, and attainment by intentionally building awareness, collaboration, and opportunities at the local level. This capacity development includes leveraging existing resources to produce greater results through sustainable initiatives, fostering partnerships, and connecting state policy efforts to local needs and initiatives.

**Edith Njuguna** Edith is the director of the Illinois Education and Career Success Network and part of the team at Education Systems Center at NIU. She has extensive experience designing and implementing programs to improve education outcomes for children and youth in Chicago and internationally. She focuses on leading the Illinois Education and Career Success Network, a collaborative of communities across Illinois, driving improved outcomes for learners by fostering partnerships, connecting state policy and local efforts, and leveraging the resources of the three Network Organizers to help communities deepen their impact. Previously, Edith was a senior program officer at Grand Victoria Foundation, where she stewarded investments of up to \$4 million a year in grants related to policy and practice in education and workforce development to support Illinois nonprofits. She has also worked in fund development in the nonprofit sector. Edith holds a Master of Public Service Management from DePaul University, a certificate in Spanish from Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Nairobi.

**Jim O'Connor** Jim grew up on a farm near Kankakee, Illinois and has degrees from University of Notre Dame, the University of Chicago, and National Louis University. Before joining Advance Illinois, Jim was a Noble Street Charter School teacher, and the founding principal at KIPP Ascend Charter School in Chicago, where he was a principal for six years. Jim was also the executive director of student services at School District U-46 in Illinois, where he administered SES tutoring for 1,000 students. Jim is an elected school board member in an elementary school district with about 5,600 students (including his two children) in Oak Park, Illinois. Jim works to ensure that every student has the opportunity to attain an excellent education.

**Tris O'Shaughnessy** Tris has spent over 20 years building connections between students and career opportunities that match their strengths and interests. Before joining the Trade Collective, she spent nearly two decades in education research, higher education, and school district administration, leading initiatives that supported underserved students and offered a head start toward certificates and degrees. She partnered with national and state agencies, school districts, school administrators and classroom teachers to develop coursework and career pathways that connected classroom learning to real-world jobs. Tris is drawn to skilled trade careers because they offer competitive wages, strong job security, hands-on work, entrepreneurial opportunities, and high job satisfaction—all with shorter training periods and less debt than traditional four-year degrees. She values listening to local businesses, educators, students and their families as she works to connect young people with these career options. A Chicagoland native who spent 30 years in the Pacific Northwest, Tris moved to Evanston in 2023 with her husband. These days, you'll find her rediscovering her favorite city, reading and listening to too many books, visiting her daughter in Wicker Park, and playing with her dog and two cats.

**Paul Oliver III** Paul is a proud alumnus of Chicago Public Schools, graduating from Lindblom Math and Science Academy. He earned a bachelor's degree in Biology with a minor in Sociology from the University of Missouri–Columbia. Paul is also an ISACorps alumnus, which is where he discovered his passion for college access and student support services. He has spent more than seven years with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, where he has developed curriculum for middle school students, led faith-based initiatives and partnerships, and represented the agency in advancing community health, education, and wraparound supports for students. Driven by a commitment to equity and opportunity, Paul is dedicated to ensuring that education beyond high school remains accessible, achievable, and affordable for generations to come.

**Emily Owen** Emily is a school counselor at Belvidere High School in District 100 with nine years of experience working alongside students to help them grow in their academic progress, college/career development, and social-emotional health. She holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and a master's degree in School Counseling from Northern Illinois University. As a Licensed Professional Counselor and National Board Certified Counselor, Emily is passionate about empowering students to feel prepared for life after high school and confident in pursuing their postsecondary goals.

**Adrienne Pickett, PhD** Adrienne is an education policy leader and researcher currently serving as the senior director for academic innovation and partnerships at the Illinois Community College Board. With a background bridging pedagogical practice and state-level policy, she supports the creation of equitable pathways between secondary and postsecondary education, focusing on early childhood workforce development, dual credit expansion, and open education resources adoption.

**Rebecca J. Pruitt, PhD** Rebecca is an associate professor of Education and director of Early Childhood Education at Lewis University. She earned her BA in Child Care Administration, MS in Child Development, and a PhD in Curriculum Studies from Oklahoma State University. Her work focuses on building accessible, sustainable programming for early childhood teacher education students across AAS, BA, MA and non-degree programs.

**Yadira Ramirez** Yadira (Yadi) is an academic advisor and recruitment coordinator in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She serves as the primary academic advisor for students in the Early Childhood Education Online Workforce Program, guiding students through matriculation all the way to graduation. The ECEOWP is a 100% online bachelor's program designed for transfer students with an associate degree and Gateway ECE Credential Level 4. As recruitment coordinator, Yadi works with community college partners to strengthen the pipeline of future early childhood education teachers in Illinois. She believes that all students can achieve their goals through targeted support and institutional resources.

**Antoinette Rayburn** Antoinette is the Career and Technical Education (CTE) academy lead for Rich Township High School District 227, where she leads districtwide college and career readiness efforts, including CTE pathways, work-based learning, and postsecondary partnerships. She brings over 18 years of experience in education as an administrator, school counselor, and teacher, with a strong focus on equitable student transitions and pathway development.

**Alexandra Ritson** Alexandra leads on qualitative projects, communications, professional learning and events at the UChicago To&Through Project. She is passionate about adult learning, supporting educators, and centering young people and their stories in order to create more equitable K-12 and higher education systems. Prior to joining the To&Through Project, Alex worked at OneGoal as the senior director of curriculum and training in Chicago. She was also a teacher coach at Teach for America Chicago and a middle school and high school English teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. She holds a Master of Education from Arizona State University and a bachelor's degree in English and Spanish from the University of Michigan.

**Stephanie Robinson** Stephanie serves as the chief executive officer of Man-Tra-Con Corporation, a nonprofit workforce development organization serving Southern Illinois. She has dedicated more than eighteen years to advancing opportunities for job seekers, strengthening employer partnerships, and supporting regional economic growth. Stephanie has held multiple leadership roles within the organization, each building on her expertise in WIOA programs, compliance, performance management, and community collaboration. Her work reflects a strong commitment to building a responsive workforce system that helps individuals reach their potential and supports the region's long-term vitality. She is an active partner in several statewide committees and initiatives focused on improving workforce outcomes and creating equitable pathways to employment. A graduate of Southern Illinois University, she has called the region home for more than 25 years.

**Linda Ruhe Marsh, EdD** Linda currently serves as the senior associate director of early childhood programs at the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) where she leads the work of the ECACE Consortium and provides leadership to higher education institutions to plan and implement programs and services responsive to legislation and Consortium decisions. Prior to joining IBHE, Linda was the director of the ECE Online Workforce Program and a faculty member at Illinois State University. Linda has been in the field of early childhood education for over 30 years. She holds an EdD in Educational Leadership, an MEd in Early Childhood Education, and a BS in Communication Science Disorders. Her experience includes teaching at the university level, supervising student teachers, consulting with schools and non-profit organizations as well as working directly with children and families as a K-2 classroom teacher, an early childhood special educator and an early interventionist. Linda also spent nine years as the director of a large urban community action agency that provided Head Start and Early Head Start services to families impacted by poverty.

**Emily Rusca** Since joining the Education Systems Center at NIU team as an Education Pioneers fellow in 2015, Emily's portfolio has spanned from college and career pathways to data engagement. As policy director, Emily leads the team's state policy portfolio by facilitating interagency and statewide structures, cultivating and managing relationships with state agency partners and fellow policy organizations, exploring national best practices and representing Illinois in cross-state learning opportunities, and collaborating with team members to identify where implementation and innovation work across Illinois can inform new opportunities for effective policy. Emily previously managed the U.S. State Department-sponsored Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study grant program for a high school exchange nonprofit in San Francisco and has additional background in international development, city planning, and gender equity work. She holds a bachelor's degree in international development from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Michigan.

**Eric Santos** As a regional educational technology coordinator for The Illinois Learning Technology Center, Eric specializes in helping Chicagoland schools effectively integrate artificial intelligence into teaching and learning. A National Board Certified Educator with nearly two decades of experience, he is a sought-after speaker who presents nationally on AI in education and consults with districts on developing AI policy and instructional strategies. Eric holds two master's degrees and serves as an Adjunct Professor at both Dominican and National Louis Universities, where he prepares future educators to leverage emerging technologies in the classroom.

**Deana Schenk** Deana serves as the senior director for student success at the Illinois Community College Board, where she partners with all 39 Illinois community college districts to advance statewide initiatives that strengthen student mental health supports, basic needs strategies, and comprehensive wraparound services. She also leads Illinois' Developmental Education Reform efforts and Direct Admissions initiative, and contributes to agency and state-level diversity, equity, inclusion, and access priorities. Previously, Deana served at the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, providing training and technical assistance to rape crisis centers and allied professionals across the state. She also taught English, literature, and humanities at several Illinois community colleges, grounding her policy leadership in direct classroom experience. A lifelong educator and equity advocate, Deana is committed to expanding access, removing systemic barriers, and ensuring students have the academic and nonacademic supports they need to persist and thrive.

**Joshua Stafford** Joshua (Josh) grew up in Southern Illinois, working for his family’s farm businesses, where he learned a great deal about management and hands-on hard work. While working full-time, he pursued his education in business administration, which led to many opportunities, including serving as school superintendent in Vienna. He has served in the school district since 2004. Under Josh’s leadership, Vienna has grown into an early college career-connected system that, according to Stafford, is always leading with the question, “What is best for kids?” Through this process, Vienna is noted both regionally and throughout the nation for its strong early college program and expansion of initiatives that connect all students to meaningful career paths. Vienna offers over 125 college-level dual credit hours on its high school schedule. Vienna also serves as a hub for numerous initiatives that allow students from across the region to participate in opportunities such as college-level courses, meaningful career preparation planning, regional economic development, and various other programs that otherwise would not be accessible. Josh is frequently asked to present on educational topics and serves as a guest lecturer at various universities, addressing a wide range of topics. He is active in various regional, statewide, and national initiatives dedicated to education policy and advocacy, and is also engaged with various local boards and committees and is a youth leader at his local church.

**Jazlyn Staniel-Pulliam** Jazlyn was born and raised in St. Louis, MO., in the heart of the south city area. She is a graduate of Webster Groves High School, earned a bachelor’s degree in Theology and Sociology from Hanover College, and a Master of Science and Education in Counselor Education, specializing in Professional School Counseling from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. In 2019, she returned to the Greater St. Louis area where she began her professional career working as a Jobs for America’s Graduates Specialist at Wyvetter Younge Alternative school in East St. Louis. While in this role, Jazlyn recognized her passion for youth workforce development and preparing students for life after high school. She is enthusiastic about teaching essential skills such as professional presence, communication skills, employability skills and financial literacy. She is now the career pathways supervisor for District 189, and is responsible for coordinating college and career readiness engagement activities for the school district. She works eagerly, cultivating employer partnerships and aligning each partnership with the Career and Technical Education pathway programs. She assists students with job opportunities, internships and entry level employment placement to provide alternatives to pursuing higher education. Jazlyn sits on several community boards, including the R3 Construction and Illinois Coalition for Community Service Board. Jazlyn remains passionate about serving students, creating opportunities for students to succeed, and connecting with community partners to offer students options for career, success, and growth.

**Robin Steans** Robin is president of Advance Illinois, an independent policy and advocacy organization working toward a healthy public education system that enables all students to achieve success in college, career, and civic life. She is also Board Chair of the Steans Family Foundation, where she helps guide education and community development grant-making in the North Lawndale community. A longtime public school parent, Robin has spent over twenty years working on public school reform. She served as Issues Director of the Small Schools Coalition, as Associate Director of Leadership for Quality Education, and taught at public high schools in Boston, San Francisco and Chicago before going on to earn her law degree. Robin serves as a Trustee of the University of Chicago Medical Center, and is co-founder and past Board Chair of the Celiac Disease Center at the University of Chicago. She helped found North Lawndale College Preparatory Charter High School and currently serves as a Director, and has served on two Local School Councils. Robin graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude from Brown University, received her master’s degree in Education from Stanford University, and attended law school at the University of Chicago, where she graduated cum laude and Order of the Coif. She is married and has three children, all of whom attended and graduated from Chicago Public Schools.

**Jeff Strohl, PhD** Jeff was one of the founding staff of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) and has served as director of research since 2008. He leads the center’s research agenda, focusing on the intersection of education and labor-market analyses and their impact on policy. Jeff also researches biases in postsecondary and labor market outcomes. Previously, Jeff was a senior analyst and project director at Westat, Inc., and was primarily involved in program evaluation and analysis of education outcomes. He helped design and direct several projects that investigated socioeconomic diversity in American education and sought to affect postsecondary admissions policies. Jeff received his BA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his MA and PhD in economics from American University. His dissertation was a cross-country study of how education can enhance overall economic flexibility in times of economic crisis and structural shift.

**Antoinette Taylor, PhD** Antoinette has over 34 years of experience in education. She focuses on evidenced based academic and social emotional development, learning and competency services and policies by consulting with policymakers, professionals, districts, and agencies across the birth-20 spectrum including but not limited to individuals with exceptional needs including disability, gifted and talented, twice exceptional and mental health. Antoinette has also worked with the business community, support groups, community-based organizations, and the faith-based community since 1999. In addition, Antoinette was the Exceptional Needs Consultant for the University of Chicago's USI/UEI Network from February 2006 to June 2010. Professional contributions include: Advisory Board of the Illinois Multi-Tiered System of Supports Network; chairperson of the State of Illinois Attendance Commission; co-chair of the Illinois Early Childhood Multi-Tiered System of Supports Consortium; policy chair, Multi-Tiered System of Supports chair, and Illinois CEC liaison for the Illinois DEC; and co-chairperson of the Division of Early Childhood 38th International Combined Conference.

**Daniela Villegas** Daniela is a senior at North Chicago Community High School. She is president of the school's chapter of the National Honor Society and interested in majoring in political science and film in college.

**Erin Volk** Erin is a 2006 graduate of Olney Central College, an Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (IECC) campus, with an Associate in Science and Arts, and a 2008 graduate of Eastern Illinois University with a Bachelor of Science in Health Studies with Teacher Certification. Erin joined IECC in 2009 as an adjunct instructor, teaching in the GED programs and remedial math. She became a full-time employee in 2012, joining the TRIO Upward Bound team. Since then, she has worked in a variety of roles, including TRIO Student Support Services Counselor, CTE Advisor, Academic Advisor, and Director of Instructional Services. During the 2023 structural reorganization, IECC created a Department of Dual Credit, staffed by two directors of dual credit. In this position, Erin serves eight of the 16 public high schools in the district and provides services including advising, registration, course requests, retention, faculty credential reviews, faculty onboarding, course reviews, and administrative tasks. Erin is based at Lincoln Trail College. Erin participates in several committees across the IECC district, including the Lincoln Trail College Technology Committee, IECC Equity Committee, and Threat Analysis and Behavioral Intervention Team, and is a member of the Illinois Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (ILACEP).

**Christina Warden** As vice president of policy and programs, Christina (Chris) leads Women Employed's policy work on racial equity in high education, education & training career pathways, and ensuring the appropriate recognition and compensation for care work. Chris has co-designed sector-based career pathways programs with City Colleges of Chicago to serve adults with academic barriers to employment and co-developed tools that are available for open use in the field, including Bridge/IET programs and Career Foundations. She has worked with community organizations and employers to implement similar programs. Under her leadership, Women Employed is the Illinois state lead working with National Skills Coalition and agency, institution, and organizational leaders statewide under the umbrella of the Lumina Foundation's FutureReady States initiative to increase student supports and barrier reduction funding for students in high-quality credential programs and degree programs.

**Matt Weis** Matt serves as the president of National Able Network, overseeing workforce programming, training and service delivery for job seekers and businesses. Matt joined National Able Network in 2014 and has led agency expansion efforts around the development of innovative employment and training programming for SNAP recipients, older workers, apprenticeships, sector-focused strategies, and other high-impact models which assist vulnerable populations with achieving self-sufficiency through employment. Matt has overseen workforce programs for more than two decades, during which time he has created and led large-scale projects that have directly assisted with the re-employment of over 40,000 job seekers across multiple geographies. He is a fierce advocate and practitioner of transitional jobs and other subsidized employment programs and has overseen a variety of workforce and employment programs focused on serving marginalized individuals and communities. Matt served as the treasurer on the Chicago Jobs Council Board of Directors for 8 years and has been cited as a workforce expert on numerous panels, publications and media outlets throughout his career.