Supporting First Generation Students from High School to College Completion

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Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers
ISAC & The ISACorps

Awareness to Action: Promoting Equity in Education and Careers
Our Mission Statement

“Providing Illinois students with information and assistance to help make education beyond high school accessible and affordable”

We are the college access and financial aid agency in the State of Illinois that administers scholarship, grant, prepaid tuition, and student loan repayment/forgiveness programs.
Illinois Student Assistance Corps

- Near-peer model began in 2009
- Approximately 85 college grads of diverse backgrounds
- Work in the communities in which they live
- Majority are first-gen and/or MAP recipients
Serving the State of Illinois

- 1 – 3 Corps members per community college district
- 6 – 8 community college districts per ISACorps Region
- 7 ISACorps Regions in Illinois
ISACorps Outreach

• Assist students (and families) overcome academic, financial, and social barriers to higher education through presentations, workshops, and one-on-one meetings

• Represent ISAC at college fairs, financial aid nights, conferences, and related outreach events

• Foster college-going culture in communities throughout Illinois

• Proactively reach out to students who may be low-income and/or will be first generation college students
Who is Considered a First Gen Student

- Definitions vary
  - 4-year degree versus postsecondary credential
  - 4-year degree earned in the US vs earned in another country
  - What if parent(s) with the degree is no longer in the picture?
- ISAC welcomes all and assists all
  - Student who does not have a parent with a 4-year degree from a college in the US (starting point)
First Generation College Student Experience
Corps Member Experience

Corps members were surveyed:

- Feeling alone in their journey
- Lack of knowledge of campus resources
- Difficulty navigating college terminology
- Difficulty with financial aid process
- Experiencing culture shock once on campus
Lexi & Celeste

Lexi - "I came from a small town of about 1,750 and graduated from a class of 88. Transitioning to a school of 20,000+ people was difficult, especially because I didn't really know anyone else there besides my brother, but I had a lot of encouragement from family to go to college." - St. Bede Academy

Celeste - "I struggled with being away from my family. I struggled with deciding what to pursue, and school in general, but I decided to pursue a degree because of how much higher education was stressed to me. I always had it in my head that I needed to go." - Thornton Fractional South HS
Anayeli & Emberly

Anayeli - "My parents are immigrants and they always pushed me to pursue a higher education as a way to have a better life and have access to mobility. I also value higher education because knowledge is something that can't be taken away from you and has value." - Morton East HS & Morton College

Emberly - "I struggled to connect with other students and make friends. I was a commuter student, and I would typically describe myself as introverted, so I struggled to make friends when I was in college. I always knew I wanted to do something in education, and I knew that to do that, I needed to go to college. I am now pursuing a graduate degree." - Mt. Zion HS
Leah & Iris

Leah - "It was hard for me to transition from a large city like Chicago to a small town. Honestly, the moment I stepped foot on campus, it was a complete culture shock. My transition to college was a struggle in itself, but when I entered my senior year, I also struggled with not knowing what I wanted to do with my life after college. I felt so much internal pressure from myself and external pressure from others to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and I had no idea."
- George Westinghouse College Prep

Iris - "Acclimating to the culture of being at a PWI (predominately white institution), along with finding a 'home away from home,' finding support systems, and dealing with imposter syndrome was a challenge."
- Jones College Prep
First Gen Scholars Network (FGSN)
FGSN Goals

- Officially started with ’22 high school graduating class
- Provide support over the summer to combat summer melt
- Help ensure a smooth & successful transition to college
- Connect students with other first gen students
- Connect students with campus resources
- Provide additional support in that first year in college
FGSN Activities & Engagement

• Students receive updates and reminders on when the FAFSA and Alternative Application for Illinois Financial Aid become available
• Students can text questions directly to ISAC
• Students are invited to events customized for first gen students:
  • “Headed to College Celebration” in May
  • “Going to College Summer YouTube Series” hosted by ISACorps, topics include:
    • “How to Have a Good College Experience on a Budget”
    • “Being Away from Home for the First Time”
    • “Keeping Sane: Balancing School, Work, and Family”
    • “Commuting: Perks & Challenges”
YouTube Going to College Summer Series

www.youtube.com/@ISACvid/playlists
FGSN Yearbook

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Joining First Gen Scholars Network

- It’s easy!!

studentportal.isac.org/FirstGen
Working Together

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It’s a Collective Effort

- Too many stages in transitioning to college where students can get overwhelmed
- Working together we can provide a clearer path
- Students are made aware of the resources and people able to assist with questions
- Together we can demystify the process for students and families
Partnering with High Schools

• Share information on FGSN webpage
• Distribute FGSN postcard to students
• Host presentations/discussion on being a first gen student and going to college
• Potentially create a first gen student group at school
• ISACorps members can work with students one-on-one or in group settings
Partnering with Colleges

- A point of contact at college to work with assigned ISAC corps member
- Provide space for ISAC to hold a financial aid application completion workshop (FAFSA & Alternative Application)
- Work together to connect students with campus resources and supports
- Share information on support programs aimed at first gen students
College Campus Programs

- Connecting students to first gen, mentoring, and/or campus support programs in Illinois via the FGSN landing page
- Let us know if the link to your program needs to be updated