 

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** Contact: Lynne Baker

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**FIVE ILLINOIS COMMUNITIES HONORED AS LEADERS IN WORKING TO IMPROVE COLLEGE ACCESS AND COMPLETION**

**Communities in Peoria, Aurora, East St. Louis, Northwest Chicago Suburbs and Lake County Receive College Changes Everything™ Champion Award**

CHICAGO – Despite state budget issues, work continues across Illinois communities to make college possible for Illinois families. Five such communities were honored last Thursday at the annual [College Changes Everything™ Conference](http://www.collegechangeseverything.org/home/) in Tinley Park, where Illinois educators, government, business and non-profit leaders gathered for discussion and workshops on the collaborative efforts underway in Illinois to increase the proportion of adults in the state with high-quality postsecondary credentials or degrees to 60% by the year 2025 (“Goal 2025”).

Each year, the College Changes Everything™ Champion Award is presented to a person or organization that has made significant contributions to help the state improve college access and completion efforts for *all* Illinois students. This year, five Illinois communities received the award for their collective efforts to advance the needs of students by, among other initiatives, building educational pathways to careers: [Aurora Regional Pathways to Prosperity](https://www.aurora-il.org/mayorsoffice/path-to-prosperity.php), [East Side Aligned](http://www.stl.unitedway.org/east-side-aligned/), [Health Professions Education Consortium of Lake County](http://www.rosalindfranklin.edu/ia/Development/HPEC.aspx), the [Northwest Educational Council for Student Success (NECSS)](http://www.necsspartnership.com/), and [Peoria Pathways to Prosperity](http://greaterpeoriaedc.org/recent-news/peoria-pathways-to-prosperity/).

“Consistent with much of the collaborative, collective impact work that is highlighted every year at the College Changes Everything™ Conference, these community initiatives are not only breaking down silos within organizations, but also across organizations to improve college access and completion at a local level,” said Eric Zarnikow, executive director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC), the agency that sponsors the conference in collaboration with other statewide governmental and non-profit organizations.

The communities honored were recently designated as “Leadership Communities” within the [Illinois 60 by 2025 Network](http://www.niu.edu/edsystems/projects/pathways/60x2025_network.shtml) (the “Network”). The Network is designed to meet the needs of communities that are working together to provide rigorous, real world learning in and out of the classroom—creating successful education to employment systems available to all students. Through a coalition formed by Advance Illinois, ISAC, and the Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University, Network organizers are building a platform for action that connects state and local agendas so that more students have access to the education they need to improve both their lives and their communities.

As a part of the Network, each of the Leadership Communities is focused on implementing local education to career pathway systems to support students in the region and help advance the state’s Goal 2025. Each Community is eligible to receive targeted technical assistance, capacity building, and funding supports through the organizations supporting the Network.

“The Leadership Communities are using data to inform their work to identify not only the near future career prospects for students, but also long term workforce development opportunities and needs,” said Sam Nelson, director of outreach development at ISAC and one of the founding organizers of the Network.  “The cross-sector collaborations underscore the importance of their efforts for the economic sustainability of these communities.”

Find out more about the work of the Illinois 60 x 2025 Network at <http://www.advanceillinois.org/outreach/60-by-25-network/> and <http://www.niu.edu/edsystems/projects/pathways/60x2025_network.shtml>

**PHOTOS and CAPTIONS ATTACHED in separate document.**

About College Changes Everything™

College Changes Everything™ is a college access movement that recognizes that college can be a life changing experience not only for students, but also for families and communities. In Illinois and across the nation, those who obtain education beyond high school not only see a significant impact on their potential career prospects and future salary, but also change levels of poverty, life expectancy, crime and obesity rates in their communities. Join the conversation and help make college relevant and possible for everyone by sharing your story about how college changed, is changing or can change everything for you. Find out more and share your story at [www.collegechangeseverything.org](file:///C:\Users\lbaker\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary%20Internet%20Files\Content.Outlook\LDV365VI\www.collegechangeseverything.org).

About ISAC

The mission of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) is to help make college accessible and affordable for students throughout Illinois. ISAC provides comprehensive, objective, and timely information on education and financial aid for students and their families--giving them access to the tools they need to make the educational choices that are right for them. Then, through the state’s flagship Monetary Award Program and other scholarship and grant programs ISAC administers—totaling more than $380 million in academic year 2014-15—ISAC can help students make those choices a reality. [www.isac.org](http://www.isac.org)

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