ONE VISION
1000 DREAMS
ONE COMMUNITY



Waukegan to College

2026 IMPACT REPORT



A Word from Our Executive Director

> **I believe one of the most important ways we build community, and become one, is through access to education.**

The power to make dreams come true and create lasting change is found in community.

Philosophers and leaders have said so for thousands of years. Aristotle taught that people reach their highest potential in the shared life of a community. America's founders declared that every person is entitled to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," and that we come together to secure those rights for one another.

I believe one of the most important ways we build community, and become one, is through access to education. Seventeen years ago, Waukegan to College launched its mission to guide students from 5th grade through college graduation, equipping them to follow their dreams.

132 of our students have now earned college degrees, and 95% of our students graduate within six years, 50% higher than the national average, and 3X higher than students from underresourced school districts.

None of that has happened alone. Our 1000 Dreams vision is to grow from 387 students active in our programming today to 1,000, and we are pursuing it as one community. You are part of that community, whether you are a donor, advocate, partner, volunteer, student, or parent.

The word community comes from the Latin *communis*, often understood as *com*, meaning "together," and *munus*, meaning "duty," "service," or "gift." We see both across Waukegan every day: families who show up, alumni who return to mentor, and partners and donors who give their time and resources. Each of you transforms a shared responsibility into a gift.

Thank you. As you read the stories in this report, I hope you see yourself in them. You aren't just supporting one student's dream. Together, we are transforming a community by being one.

Aaron Arnold
Executive Director





WHAT WE DO

Turning Dreams Into Opportunity

Waukegan to College supports Waukegan students to follow their dreams through a college education. We provide the guidance, resources, and relationships they need to succeed. For donors, volunteers, and partners, supporting Waukegan to College means investing in students and the future of our community.

Get them ready.

Our College Readiness program begins with students as early as 5th grade. We provide academic advising, career exploration, and tutoring. This prepares middle school students for high school success and beyond.

Get them in.

Our College Access program starts in the 11th grade. We help students make informed decisions on the right college or university for them. Then we guide them through the application and financial aid process to ensure the best possible choice for them and their family.

Get them through.

Our College Persistence program supports college students through on-campus visits from their advisors, financial or mental health resources, and internship opportunities, setting them up for success in college and after graduation.

Milestones Reached in 2026

132 total college graduates since 2009

61 unique colleges and universities attended

$158M+ additional lifetime earnings of our alumni

97 new students joined the program

100% of seniors matriculated to college

387 students in our program

2026 by the Numbers

95% college graduation rate

Our Mission

Waukegan to College exists to create brighter futures for first-generation students, their families, and their community by preparing students to enroll in and graduate from a four- year college or university.



THE RIPPLE EFFECT

A student's journey doesn't end with a diploma. It ripples outward—into careers, families, relationships, and the community around them. When one student has the opportunity to dream, grow, and succeed, they create new possibilities for others.

Meet Sebastian

Sebastian is an 8th grader at Miguel Juarez Middle School with a growing passion for mechanical and computer hardware engineering. His curiosity began by taking apart a solar-powered calculator and an old family computer to learn how they worked. Since joining Waukegan to College in 5th grade, college visits, career exploration, and cohort sessions have helped him turn that curiosity into a clear goal: studying engineering and building a future in technology. He is especially excited to continue exploring engineering programs at schools such as Caltech, Illinois Tech, and MIT.







College Dreams Start Here

In Waukegan, we see potential everywhere. We believe in the power of education and how it can help Waukegan's young people achieve their dreams. Waukegan to College turns that potential into possibility, working in partnership with parents, the school district, state and local officials, faith communities, and businesses. We are certain that when we invest in education, the whole community benefits.

DID YOU KNOW?

Early support creates lasting impact. Waukegan to College has an early intervention strategy and starts working with students as young as the 5th grade. This reaches young people when college expectations are forming and increases the likelihood of college success.



It’s Never Too Early to Discover Your Dream

There is a saying, “If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.” One of the ways we help students begin to discover and develop their dream is through experiential learning. Programs like Expanding Horizons make early exploration fun through field trips, hands-on learning, and college and career experiences that help students grow their interests and begin asking questions like, “What do I want to do for a career?” and “How do I get there?”



Middle school students visit National Louis University’s campus.

Hiking and Nature Bathing in partnership with Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods.





Skyrocket Day Camp used art to teach math and language.

College Readiness

5th Grade Through 10th Grade

EXPANDING HORIZONS

College campus visits, career exploration, arts and culture, civic engagement, and leadership experiences.

SUMMER LEARNING

Annual Skyrocket Day Camp, Summer Learners Workshop, outdoor camp experiences, and more!

Students explore healthcare careers at Medline.



ACADEMIC ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Khan Academy and XtraMath for Math enrichment, Read2Achieve, 1:1 Tutoring, in-person and virtually.

COHORTS AND 1:1 ADVISING

5th-7th graders meeting in cohorts of 8-10 students, and beginning in 8th grade individually with their college readiness advisor. Parents of middle schoolers have simultaneous workshops.

Pat Ludwig meets with her Read2Achieve student Sophia and they read together at Waukegan Public Library.





Through programs like Khan Academy, over 80% of our middle school students have an A or B in math.



7th grade students meet monthly for cohort academic advising.



Onsite Pathways Program

In partnership with the Waukegan Public School District, we are now providing weekly onsite programming in all five middle schools. This initiative, as well as after-school clubs that focus on career exploration and college readiness, are part of our Future Leaders programming. Last year, we facilitated campus visits to the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee for more than 200 students from John R. Lewis Middle School.

Middle school team lead, Jackie Lopez, meets with an 8th grade student and their parent for 1:1 advising.



Designing the Path: Dreams Becoming Reality

Waukegan to College's College Access Program helps students turn early interests into clear plans for their future. Through academic guidance, leadership and enrichment opportunities, campus visits, essay coaching, ACT prep, college and scholarship applications, and personalized advising, students build the knowledge, confidence, and self-advocacy skills they need to make informed decisions about where they will continue their education after high school.



Juniors raised their ACT scores by at least 2 points through our ACT prep course.



Nikki Anderson and her mentee, Humberto, shared about his acceptance to Dominican University at our Year-End Celebration.



Mayra Perez, College Access Advisor and Team Lead, celebrated the amazing news with 2026 Hope Scholarship recipient Josselin.

College Access

11th and 12th Grade

COLLEGE APPLICATION SUPPORT

Students begin preparing for the college application process during their junior year. Their advisors and essay coaches help them navigate the application process with confidence and take the next step toward their dream school.

MENTORING

Mentors are one of Waukegan to College's key volunteer roles. Through consistent 1:1 support, students expand their perspective, learn from someone who has been down the college path, and stay focused on the future they are working toward.

SCHOLARSHIP AND FINANCIAL AID

High school seniors meet weekly at Scholarship Club to research, identify, and apply for scholarships. Advisors meet with students and parents so that they can make informed financial decisions and reduce the cost of college.

COLLEGE CAMPUS VISITS

During their junior and senior year, students visit many different college campuses, participate in fly-in programs, and attend college fairs in order to narrow their choices of which college or university they want to attend.

At decision day, each senior placed a flag in the cake representing the college they will attend.



High school juniors start working on their personal statements during Spring Break Week.





It gets real during College Application Week in August as rising seniors start submitting their applications.

Campus visits like this one to UIUC help seniors to make final decisions on which college they want to attend.



Meet Nailah

Nailah joined Waukegan to College in 8th grade and is now a senior at Waukegan High School. With encouragement from her advisors, she took AP Psychology, which helped confirm her dream of becoming a psychiatrist. College visits, especially to UIC, have helped her picture a future in downtown Chicago. Outside of school, Nailah volunteers at Orphans of the Storm, an experience that inspires the compassion she hopes to bring to her future work helping others feel confident, valued, and empowered.





Congratulations, Class of 2026!

Our Scholars are Going Places

DECISION SCHOOLS | HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATING CLASS OF ’26

Lake Forest College · Illinois College · Princeton University · Northern Illinois University · UIS · Loyola University Chicago · University of Wisconsin-Madison · Dominican University · National Louis University · Northwestern University · University of Michigan · SIU · College of Lake County · SIUE · University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign · UIC · Arrupe College of Loyola University Chicago

This year we celebrated our largest graduating class since our beginning in 2009!

36 seniors matriculating to college

18 universities our graduates are heading to

267 total college acceptances

383 college applications submitted

$15M+ in scholarships and aid offered

MAKING COLLEGE AFFORDABLE

Thanks to our generous donors who provided 14 scholarships exclusive to Waukegan to College seniors, totaling over $200,000.

Ken & Sandy Falkinham Scholarship
$40,000 over four years
Jamil Chuc

Pay It Forward Scholarship
$30,000 over three years
Carlos Adan

Hope Scholarship
$20,000 over four years
Josselin Rivera

Susie Hoffmann Scholarship
$1,500 one time
Ismail Hussaini
Jeremiah McDonald

Kindness Campaign Scholarship
$10,000 one time
Ismail Hussaini

Mark R. Reckling Scholarship
$43,000 over four years
Humberto Mendez
Janell Sanchez

Chuck Gutman Envision Scholarship
$4,000 over four years
Adarel Lechuga
Andrea Robledo

American Place Community Scholarship
$1,000 one time
Jennifer Calvo Estrada
Jamil Chuc
Marlen Dominguez
Adarel Lechuga
Ismail Hussaini
Jeremiah McDonald

DID YOU KNOW?

Our goal is that students begin college with a financial gap of $3,500 or less. In 2026, the average financial gap was $2,130.41.







Waukegan to *and through* College

Getting students into college is only one phase of the journey. Our College Persistence team stays connected with students as they adjust to campus life or commute to school. We do monthly check-ins and provide encouragement, emergency funding, and advocacy. We ensure they are connected to campus and local resources. Wherever students go, they remain part of our growing community and receive the support they need to thrive.

CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS OF 2026

Aaliyah Decillo
Elmhurst University
BS Biology

Adrian Rojas
Boston University
BS Computer Science

Adriana Bahena
Davidson College
BA French Studies & Education

Ana Alvarez
Macalester College
BA Economics & Educational Studies

Botnia Calzada
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
BS Human Development & Family Studies

Michelle Cazares
New York University
BA Theatre

Alex Collins
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
BA Criminology & Criminal Justice

Diane Romero
University of Illinois Chicago
BS Architecture

Eduardo Alfaro
Beloit College
BA Media & Graphic Design

Frank Sanchez
Hope College
BS Mechanical Engineering

Isam Hussaini
Macalester College
BA Neuroscience

Jasmine Chuc
Vanderbilt University
BA Sociology

Miguel Valdovinos
Brown University
BA Economics, International & Public Affairs

Nohemi Aguilar
Butler University
BA Art, Design & Strategic Communications

Rosa Echeverria Escobar
Knox College
BA Business Management & Economics

Stephanie Calderon
Northwestern University
BS Psychology & Global Health Studies

Tania Campuzano
Lake Forest College
BA Business Management



Nicole and Roger, sophomores at NIU.

College Persistence

For College Students and Beyond

FIRST-YEAR CAMPUS VISITS

Starting college requires a major adjustment, whether students remain close to home or move across the country. To ensure every college freshman is reminded that support is never far away, a Waukegan to College team member visits them on campus to see how they are settling in, share a meal, and experience their new community together.

PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS FUND

Waukegan to College provides resources to college students facing unexpected challenges that could interrupt their education or opportunities which could enhance their college journey. This fund helps students stay enrolled, focused, and continue moving toward graduation.

STAYING CONNECTED

In order to maintain great communication and understand our college students' status and needs, Waukegan to College partners with UtmostU. Each month our students fill out a survey and each semester share their transcripts so we can support them in an informed way. UtmostU also provides professional development, career guidance, and mental health support for our students.



Jasmine Chuc, Vanderbilt University Class of 2026, shared her story at the 2026 Year-End Celebration.



Parents proudly celebrate their son, Eduardo Alfaro, Beloit College Class of 2026.



Advisor Willie Brown with Shyanna Itza, first-year campus visit at Butler University.

Meet Luis

Luis Gonzalez-Xochihua is a Macalester College sophomore (Class of 2029). Luis, a Waukegan High School graduate, joined Waukegan to College as an 11th grader and, with our advisors' support, finished high school with a weighted GPA above 4.0. His efforts paid off, and he was honored as a Hagan Scholar, a Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholar, and a Posse finalist. He is studying environmental science, inspired by his experiences at Camp Nebagamon, where he later returned as a part-time counselor. He hopes to build a career protecting the environment and creating positive change in his community.



WHEN SUCCESS COMES FULL CIRCLE



MOISES ARREOLA-MALAGON

Lake Forest College, Class of 2025, Computer Science

Moises began tutoring middle school math through Khan Academy because he struggled with similar academic challenges in middle school and even high school. Today, he gives back to Waukegan to College by being the advocate and support-person that he needed when he was younger. Moises regularly comes back to Waukegan to College events as a volunteer for Open Houses and other workshops so he can share his experience with the rest of the community.



NYAH BROWN

Knox College, Class of 2025, Education

Nyah Brown is a Waukegan to College alumna whose leadership extends into every community she joins. As a Youth Development Professional with the Boys & Girls Club of Lake County, she supports young students through daily learning and enrichment activities. From founding and leading student organizations at Knox College to helping guide Waukegan to College's Alumni Network and volunteering at events such as the 1000 Dreams Gala, Nyah continues to create spaces for connection, growth, and opportunity.

This is what community looks like!

I am a senior at Elmhurst University studying psychology and sociology, with a triple minor in social work, Spanish, and race and ethnic studies. Since joining Waukegan to College in 8th grade, I have continued to pursue opportunities that strengthen both my academic goals and my commitment to helping others. My undergraduate research, including a study on how social media affects students' academic progress, has deepened my interest in understanding the systems that shape student success. I have also shared my experience with Waukegan to College high school freshmen during a panel with other current college students. As I prepare for graduate study in social work or a data-focused field, I look forward to continuing to give back and joining Waukegan through Waukegan to College's Alumni Network after graduation.

Leslie Lopez, Elmhurst University, Class of 2027



THANK YOU TO OUR GENEROUS DONORS, SUPPORTERS, AND PARTNERS

We are grateful to the hundreds of donors, foundations, faith communities, and corporations who provide the resources we need to offer programming to almost 400 students! Here are some of the reasons why they support Waukegan to College:

AMGEN

"The Amgen Foundation is proud to support Waukegan to College in empowering students and families through education, as part of its commitment to strengthening the communities where Amgen employees live and work.

GRAND FOUNDATION

"Waukegan is our hometown, and as a family foundation, we are deeply invested in supporting first-generation students on their path to higher education. The unwavering dedication of the staff, students, and their families in nurturing this dream is inspiring, and we are privileged to stand alongside them.

THE LAKE COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

"Waukegan to College is a valuable partner and resource for our community. All students deserve to have the opportunities, access and resources needed to achieve their dreams. Investing in them is an investment in our community's future.

Thank You to Our Community Partners: We couldn't do it without you!

Afterschool Alliance · Boys & Girls Club of Lake County · Brushwood Center at Riverboon Woods · College Lake County · Cool Learning Experience · educational ENDEAVORS · HACES · Heart of the City · Gamers Glorified · Leap · WPS60 · Lake Forest Open Lands · pupil · stemgirls camp · TutorBird · Waukegan Public Library · City of Waukegan Illinois · waukegan historical society museums & library · XtraMath

Thanks to the 150+ volunteers helping make dreams come true!







Join us and invest in the lives of Waukegan's promising, talented, and hard-working students through volunteering!

At Waukegan to College, we offer a variety of volunteer opportunities that cater to different skills and interests, including mentors, tutors, Read2Achieve volunteers, and support for special programming. Your time and dedication will directly contribute to helping these remarkable young people follow their dreams by earning a college degree, transforming their lives and the community.

DID YOU KNOW?

100+ mentors needed!

27+ subject tutors needed!

To join as a volunteer, scan this QR code or visit our website today. Let's get to 1,000 dreams, together.

Our Team

Aaron Arnold
Executive Director

Laura Rios
Program Director

Joseph Young
Assistant Program Director

Laura Garcia
Academic Enrichment Coordinator

Noemi Garcia
Sr. College Readiness Advisor, 9th Grade

Jackie Lopez
College Readiness Team Lead, 8th Grade

Mayra Perez
College Access Team Lead, 12th Grade

Willie Brown
Sr. College Persistence Advisor

Victoria Velazquez
College Access Advisor, 11th Grade

Melissa Ramirez
College Readiness Advisor, 10th Grade

Adriel Anguiano
College Readiness Advisor, 5th & 6th Grade

Estrella Ortiz
College Readiness Advisor, 7th Grade

Matthew Hixon
College Readiness Advisor Middle School Onsite

Ebony Cox
Student Success Manager

Gabriela Nevarez
Community Engagement Coordinator

Tyshun Robinson
Student Experience Coordinator

Jesus Martinez
Operations Manager

Angie Sage
Individual Giving Manager

Jared Verdejo
Marketing & Communications Specialist

To learn more about Laura's story and the origin of Waukegan to College, check out founding executive director Elyse Danckers' latest book: ***Building Futures, Inspiring Hope: Stories from Waukegan to College.***

To order a book, please fill out our online form:

waukegantocollege.org/book

Thank you, Laura, for 16 years!

"I was a community organizer in Lorain, Ohio when I first encountered the work happening in Waukegan to help parents guide their kids toward college. That's why I do this work: I know exactly what it's like to be someone who could go further but doesn't have the direction."

Laura Rios, Program Director



LETTER FROM OUR

Board President

I recently read Elyse Danckers' new book about the genesis of Waukegan to College, titled ***Building Futures, Inspiring Hope***. In it, Elyse recalls a 2008 conversation with an acquaintance. That person described the under-resourced nature of a school not far from the well-resourced one that Elyse's children attended. Elyse was struck by the "kids so nearby who didn't stand a chance of realizing their full potential." But her thought was a seed of hope, for she next writes that "there most certainly were children who could become scientists, lawyers, doctors, leaders, and more."

Her book next describes the sweat and financial equity that turned that seed into the small oak tree our organization has become. Today, almost 400 students are making their own dreams a reality. Many of you reading this provide both the time and money that keep our mighty tree growing.

Waukegan to College invests in individuals, but we are truly building community.

As this Impact Report shows, our tree is part of a thriving forest. Your support makes this possible.

Thank you, and onward!



Steve Rice
Board President





Our Board of Directors

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Gilberto Colin
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Parent

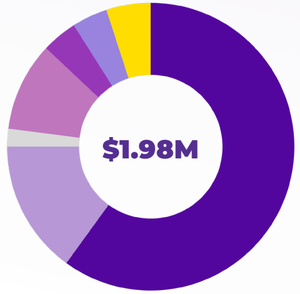
Josue Pasillas

Melissa Jarmel

Thank you for your commitment to our students!

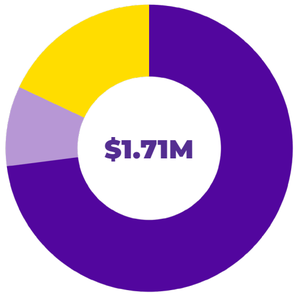


FY26 Financials



INCOME

- Foundations
- Individual Donations
- Government Grants
- Designated Scholarship
- Congregational Grants
- Corporate Grants
- Events & Other Income



EXPENSES

- Program
- Fundraising
- Management & General

"Waukegan to College helped make my college journey possible by providing the support, encouragement, and scholarship assistance I needed to pursue my goals. I've had tutors and mentors I will never forget. They pushed me to follow my dreams and that encouragement got me through my business degree at DePaul University and my MBA in Finance at Marquette University. Without this program, I may not have matriculated to college.

Today, as board treasurer, I am proud to give back to the organization that opened many doors for me. When we invest in students' dreams, we invest in the future of our families, our communities, and the leaders who will carry it forward.

Gilberto Colin, Waukegan to College Alumnus
Treasurer, Board of Directors

For more detailed financials, visit our website:
www.waukegantocollege.org/financials



ONE VISION

1000 DREAMS

ONE COMMUNITY







Every dream deserves a pathway, and every student deserves a community that believes in their potential. From the first spark of curiosity to college, career, and beyond, Waukegan to College walks alongside students and families at every step. **When we invest in students, we invest in stronger families, thriving communities, and a brighter future for all of us.**





Thank you for supporting us on our journey to 1000 Dreams!



Waukegan to College

Follow the journey.

Download the digital version of this report here:

www.waukegantocollege.org