



Invest in Hope, Empower Dreams



FY25 IMPACT REPORT ►►

Summe

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Waukegan High School 2025
Graduate Arvin Paul

A LETTER FROM OUR Executive Director

Hope is still alive! As you read through this year’s Impact Report, there is no doubt that you will be inspired. We all need that right now as we navigate the changes and challenges of our current reality. Whether it’s how AI will change jobs, economic uncertainty, or the global conflicts in so many parts of the world, I find that many people are looking for something positive and life-giving in which to invest their time and resources.

This past year, we continued to grow our impact in the community. Our enrollment grew to over 300 students, we extended our on-site programming to three Waukegan middle schools, and we expanded our staff to include an academic advisor for every grade level. Why? We have a vision called 1000 Dreams and want to grow to have 1000 students in our program. There is nothing that gives me more hope than listening to our students talk about their dreams – to be an immigration lawyer, to be an entrepreneur and start their own business, to be a doctor who serves low-income families, or to be a software engineer. 1000 students equals 1000 dreams.

At Waukegan to College, while our method is focused on education and preparing students to succeed academically after high school, when it comes down to the core of our mission, we are in the business of dreams.

There is an old Greek proverb that says, “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.” That only occurs when a society believes in and finds hope in the younger generation, who will be the next leaders, inventors, and caretakers of the future. We would not be able to do what we do without the generous and faithful support from so many individuals, foundations, faith communities, and corporations. Thank you for believing in the youth and families of Waukegan and for being willing to invest in supporting them as they follow their dream through a college education.

Peace and hope,



Aaron Arnold
Executive Director

STUDENT SUCCESS STORY

Moises Arreola

I am Moises Arreola, a recent graduate of Lake Forest College with a degree in Computer Science. I am now a Software Developer at Medline working on their AI/Automation team.

Waukegan to College single-handedly changed the trajectory of my life. We moved to Waukegan from Chicago to be close to family in the area. My parents wanted a better future for us kids and they moved to the US for that sole purpose.

Right before I started high school, Waukegan High School hosted an open house. My mom stopped by the Waukegan to College table, and although she is not very good in English, she does understand the word “college”. She talked to the representatives who spoke Spanish and took almost every single form on the table. She gave me the program application and, even though I was shy and didn’t want to do it, I applied. I got in!

Waukegan to College isn’t just a college readiness program where you drop off your kid and they turn you into a college student. It really is a relationship between the student, the parent, and the advisor. It’s like a “triangle of trust”.

My Waukegan to College tutor taught me to love math, and now I am a math tutor to help others who struggle like I did. My parents participated in Waukegan to College programs designed for families about the college journey. And my career advisor at Waukegan to College helped me build my application package and choose colleges.

If my mom had not seen the Waukegan to College sign and picked up an application for me, I would never have realized my dream, and my parents’ dream, for a better future through a college degree.

Watch this video to learn more about Moises’ journey:

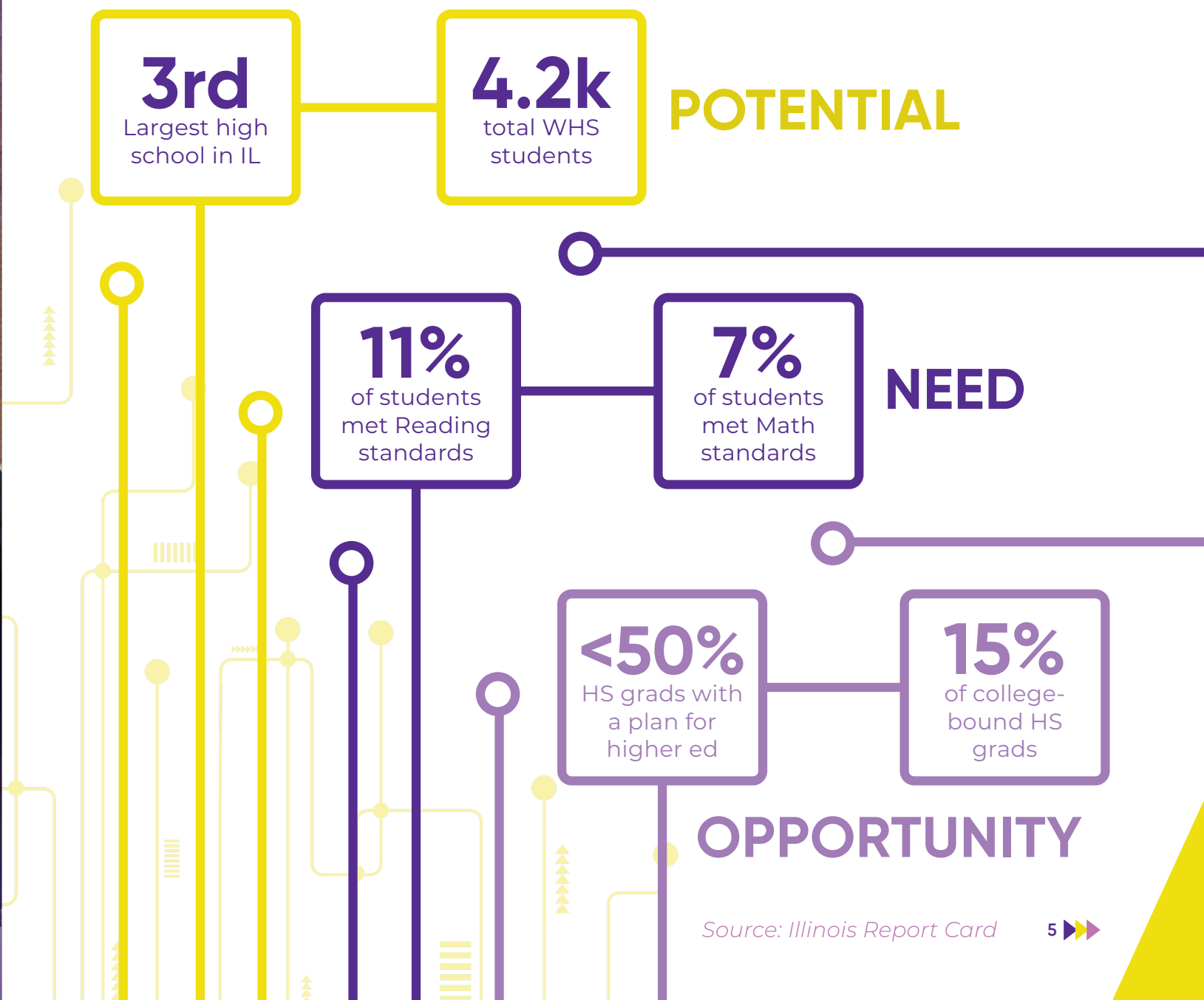


Lake Forest College 2025 Graduate Moises Arreola

We Are Here Where the Need is Greatest

Waukegan High School at a Glance

All students have dreams for the future and the potential to follow them: We meet them where they are and support them on their journey to and through college.



What Sets Us Apart: We Shape Dreams

What do we look for in a student for optimal success?

Hope, Hunger, and Hustle: We begin working with students as early as the 5th grade. We look for a willingness to learn, dedication to working hard in pursuing their dreams, and a parent or caregiver who supports the process and wants the best for their child's future. After they complete our application and are selected via interviews, our team and programs guide them as they shape their trajectory for success every step of the way.

Our Approach

We address the whole student, adding credence to their hopes and dreams, through a comprehensive pathway of programming all the way through college graduation.

Our innovative, hands-on learning experiences spark curiosity, build critical thinking, and connect academics to the real world. From cooking math-infused recipes to coding, solving mysteries, and building canoes, our students apply what they learn in creative and memorable ways that inspire them and prepare them for success in high school, college, and career.

“All the people that I talk to, I tell them that Waukegan to College inspires students to study, go to college, so they can do something with their lives.

Waukegan to College is a very important part of our lives. It is not just about the academics, but the esteem that everyone here has for all students and families. We are always welcomed with smiles and it's like 'ahhh we are home.'”

-Proud Waukegan to College Parent

Waukegan High School 2025
Graduate Alexsa Garcia

Our Programs are Designed to Meet Needs and Spark Curiosity

Our programs—built on a partnership with scholars, their families, and community members—are uniquely designed for first-generation college success. No matter where a student starts on the journey to and through college, we have the resources to make the process accessible, efficient, and effective.

For 5th through 8th Graders: *Skyrocket*

A summer program, which helps to close the learning gap, blends math, reading, writing, and active listening through creative, hands-on themes like “Shark Tank” and “Master Chef Jr.” Students practice academic skills while designing, pitching, and creating ideas in a fun, collaborative environment.

For High Schoolers: *Urban Wilderness Boat Build Program* (in collaboration with Lake Forest Open Lands)

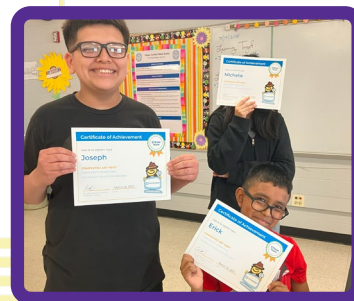
Students apply STEM concepts to design and build a functional canoe. From measuring and geometry to engineering and buoyancy, they use teamwork and problem-solving to turn classroom lessons into a real-world achievement, then test their creation on the middle fork of the North branch of the Chicago River.

For College Students:

The support doesn't stop once they get on a college campus. In partnership with UtmostU, college students keep in touch with their advisor regularly, have access to funds for emergencies or opportunities like unpaid internships, and referrals for mental health issues.

Key Partnerships Add Value to Learning and Experiences

With Compudopt and LEAP Innovations Learning Network, **14** middle school students and **16** high school students were awarded laptops for school and program use, and over **40** students gained experience in public speaking and building their personal brand.



Tutoring Boosts and Sustains Excellent Academic Performance

Of the students who participated in tutoring, **95%** of middle school students maintained or improved their grades to As or Bs in English, **84%** in Math; **78%** of high school students maintained or improved their grades to As and Bs in English, **90%** in Math.

Parent Involvement Enhances Family Attention and Support

Parents and caregivers are deeply engaged, with **92%** attending monthly advising sessions led by our experienced parent educator team. They join college visits, participate in Expanding Horizons programs, and take part in financial aid reviews and college selection discussions—gaining firsthand insight into their children's opportunities and choices.



Holistic Student Support Builds a Stronger Foundation

Student-informed changes to the Supporting the Whole Student program produced significant outcomes: **85%** of students reported highly positive emotions (less stressed, happy, calm, relaxed, energized) after exploring nature. After our Summer "Destress Fest" Send-Off during final exam week, **96%** reported highly positive emotions, including feeling more connected with others.

Waukegan to College 2025 College Graduates

Armonie Collins — Western Illinois University, Nursing

Diana Diaz — Smith College, Computer Science

Cristian Diaz Santos — North Park University, Politics and Government

James Donville — Lake Forest College, Psychology

Gabriela Serna Gutierrez — Columbia College, Architecture

Moises Arreola — Lake Forest College, Computer Science

Nyah Brown — Knox College, Education Administration

Maurice Davison — Butler University, Health Administration

Jesus Murillo — Augustana College, Biological Sciences

Pedro Ocampo — University of Illinois (UIUC), Mechanical Engineering

Giselle Palomar — Elmhurst University, Business Management

Emilio Salgado — Bradley University, Mechanical Engineering

Alexis Valdovinos — Case Western Reserve University, Business (Accounting)

Student Testimonial: Alexis Valdovinos

Alexis Valdovinos

Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), Class of 2025, B.S., Accounting
Currently in a Master's Program in Accounting Analytics at Northeastern University in Boston, MA.

Alexis now works with PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) as a tax specialist. Her employer is funding her graduate program and the acquisition of her CPA license.

Empowered with resources, strategies and tactics from Waukegan to College readiness programming, she dove into involvement while at CWRU:

Activity on Campus

- ▶ Beta Alpha Psi (Honors organization for accounting students)
- ▶ First CWRU (first-generation college student club)
- ▶ La Alianza (Latinx student organization)

Internships

- ▶ PwC Tax Intern (2024)
- ▶ KPMG Embark Scholar (2023)
- ▶ Waukegan to College Intern (2022)

Experiential Learning

- ▶ Greenhouse Scholar Conferences
- ▶ Networking Conferences with PwC, KPMG, and EY
- ▶ Harvard University LEAD Conference
- ▶ Study Abroad Program in Madrid, Spain (2024)



"Completing my bachelors degree and continuing my masters program debt-free was a significant accomplishment, not only for me, but also for my family. As I reflect on my journey, being a first-generation college student didn't set me back, it was an identity that set me apart. This identity allowed me to engage with Waukegan to College, an organization that has been crucial in my educational journey."

People Are Our Greatest Asset

Students, families, and advisors collaborate on the college journey; alongside tutors, mentors, essay coaches, and other volunteers. Together, they synergistically propel the dream forward and guide the student with resources to navigate the college path.

Staff, Volunteers, and the Community Empower Students' Dreams

Zari has been mentoring Nailah, a senior at Waukegan High School, since 2024. Zari was born and raised in Waukegan. She attended the Waukegan to College end-of-year celebration for seniors heading off to college:

“I didn’t even know half of the students there, but I was so proud of every single one of them. Coming from our area, I know how hard it can be to get that opportunity, especially if your family struggles financially. Many of these students were first generation, and they weren’t just doing this for themselves, they were doing it for their families, too. It reminded me so much of my own story, how my parents sacrificed for me, and how proud I felt walking across that stage with my degrees. Seeing those students have that same moment made me emotional, and it reminded me exactly why I mentor.”

Melissa, a volunteer essay coach, helps guide students in crafting their personal statements for their college applications. Here is why she keeps coming back:

“As an essay coach/college support, I have really enjoyed the role I play in helping Waukegan to College students achieve their goal of attending college. The biggest win for me is when a student feels empowered to share their story with confidence and authenticity which keeps me coming back year after year.”



Volunteers, Mentors are VITAL to student success: your time investment doubles in rewards! Find out more here:
www.waukegantocollege.org/volunteer-opportunities



Waukegan High School 2025 Graduate Katherine Rivas

Meet Our Team

Waukegan to College Staff

Aaron Arnold
Executive Director

Willie Brown
College Persistence Advisor

Laura Garcia
College Readiness Advisor,
5th–6th Grade

Noemi Garcia
Team Lead, High School College
Readiness & HR Advisor, 9th Grade

Jacklyn Hernandez
College Readiness Advisor, 10th
Grade

Jackie Lopez
Team Lead, Middle School College
Readiness & Advisor, 8th Grade

Jesus Martinez
Operations Manager

Estrella Ortiz
College Readiness Advisor,
7th Grade

Mayra Perez
College Access Advisor,
12th Grade

Laura Rios
Program Director

Angie Sage
Individual Giving Manager

Dave Thomas
College Readiness Advisor,
Middle School

Tyshun Robinson
Student Experience
Coordinator

Victoria (Tori) Velazquez
College Access Advisor,
11th Grade

Jared Verdejo
Marketing and
Communications
Specialist

Joseph Young
College Persistence
Manager

“College Persistence Manager, Joseph Young, has this to say about the expertise of advisors for these students:

“Our advisors are experts in understanding and nurturing each student’s unique potential, starting in 5th grade. At every stage on the journey to college, our advisors open doors to explore interests and career paths, ensuring students and their families are well-prepared for the next steps.

One of our key success indicators is helping students secure scholarships, aiming to keep their annual out-of-pocket costs as low as possible. This year, 75% of our rising freshman college students met our goal of \$3,500 or less.



Waukegan to College Scholar Andrea Palma with
College Persistence Manager Joseph Young

Investing in Hope Fuels Student Success

Were it not for those who support our students' dream to reach for college and attain that diploma; were it not for those who see the impact any level of investment makes to involve more students, design more programs, equip more advisors, and collaborate with the community, we would not be at this critical juncture to propel Waukegan to College toward 1000 Dreams. We are grateful to all who contribute time, treasure, and talent and make what we do at Waukegan to College possible!



We acknowledge those who have boosted us to the next level for the 2024-2025 year:



St. James Lutheran Church

"Waukegan to College is making tremendous strides to achieve the ambitious goal of serving 1,000 students by 2030! What a privilege to stand alongside this wonderful organization, empowering the next generation through education."
—**St. James Lutheran Church, Lake Forest**



"The Julian Grace Foundation is proud to support the work and mission of Waukegan to College. Waukegan to College is one of those rare organizations that consistently exceeds expectations. Their commitment to educational equity, family engagement, and long-term student success is both inspiring and deeply effective. Supporting Waukegan to College is more than a grant—it is a partnership in building a future where students have the opportunity to thrive."
—**Julian Grace Foundation**



"Why do I invest in Waukegan to College: The key to improved financial future we can give young people is a college education. What they do with it is up to them but we are happy to provide them with the opportunity. Why Waukegan? Building a more successful neighbor community that we can see is gratifying. We believe in helping close to home."
—**Anonymous Individual Donor**

Thank you to more than 350 donors for choosing to invest in our students' dreams in FY25!

A contribution to Waukegan to College is an investment in the lives of promising, talented, and hard-working young people in Waukegan. This will not just impact them as an individual, but will transform their family and the community of Waukegan.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

13

graduated from college

114

college graduates since founding

95%

college graduation rate

87%

of students have A/B in Math or ELA

32

matriculated to college

91

currently in college

SCHOOLS CURRENTLY ATTENDING

- Augustana College
- Barnard College
- Beloit College
- Boston University
- Bowdoin College
- Brown University
- Butler University
- Carthage College
- College of Lake County
- Cornell University
- Davidson College
- DePaul University
- DePauw University
- Dominican University
- Elmhurst University
- Hobart and Williams Smith College
- Hope College
- Illinois State University
- Knox College
- Lake Forest College
- Loyola University
- Macalester College
- Marquette University
- Milwaukee School of Engineering
- New York University
- Northern Illinois University
- Northwestern University
- Reed College
- Regis University
- Smith College
- Southern Illinois University- Carbondale
- University of Illinois at Chicago
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
- University of Illinois Chicago
- University of Illinois Springfield
- University of Miami
- University of Richmond
- Vanderbilt University
- Washington University in St. Louis
- Scripps College
- Whitman College

Letter from Our Board President

At a time when the talk is all about artificial intelligence, our Waukegan to College students keep leveraging the old-school smarts and grit that have stood the test of time! Is their effort worth it in light of rapid technological change? As the saying goes: the way to solve a problem in an hour is to think 55 minutes about the proper question and 5 minutes to work out the solution. Pondering life’s many questions will forever be the key journey humans undertake; our students have their feet planted on that path.

Remember your own adolescent and educational journey? Think about the people who traveled with you: parents; siblings; teachers; mentors; friends. For many of us there was an advisor or tutor or two. These human resources are those that our program is meant to aid and foster. But why speak of “resources” as if we’re calculating “compute” or the headcount at a company? Our students learn to lead themselves to a better future, assisted by wonderful people. If you’re reading this, you are very likely one of them.

If you’re not currently investing in our students’ future, right now is the best time: for them, for us, and for the greater community.

Our Board seeks to provide financial oversight while staff tailors programs and life-shaping college-bound experiences for each student. All of this ensures every dollar you invest in our students gets—if you’ll pardon the business-speak—a maximum return on investment. That maximum return, in our sense, means that our program continues to grow in the number of students participating in grade school, matriculating to college, and achieving their degrees. And it means more programming and connecting more mentors and volunteers. Donate, volunteer, mentor a student and watch your investment grow. **1,000 Dreams, here we come.**

With your help, onward!

Steve Rice
Board President

Board of Directors

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Board President

Gilberto Colin
Vice President

Kim Furrer Lenzini
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Valerie Lopez Finn
Treasurer

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Jennessa Lystlund

Claudia Phalen

Najet Torres
Parent

Gala Torres
Alumni Board
Representative

FORMER MEMBERS WHO SERVED LAST FISCAL YEAR

Joan Boughton
Former Board President

Syed Hussaini
Parent

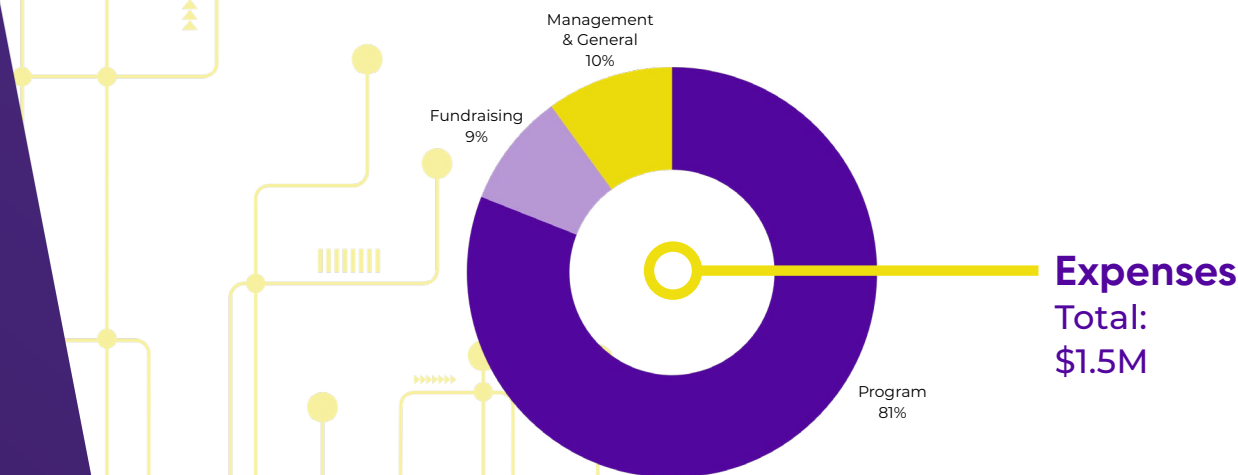
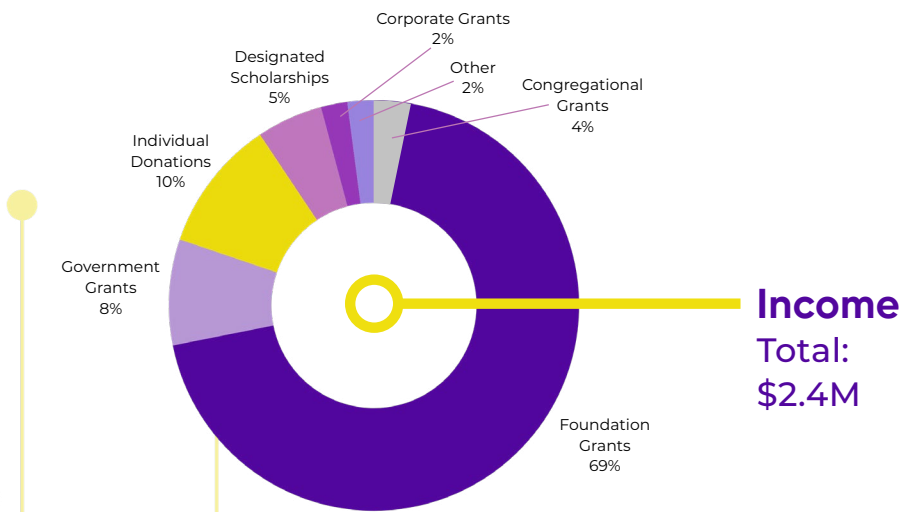
Marshall Lancaster

Iain Lopata

Education: A Cause Worth Investing In

FY2025 Financials

Thank you to our generous donors and supporters. You are paving the path with us toward 1000 dreams.



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



Will You Join Us in Investing in Hope Today?

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.



www.waukegantocollege.org

*Follow our journey
to 1000 Dreams!*



Download and share the digital version of this report:
www.waukegantocollege.org/our-impact