Transforming Lives
The Illinois Promise 10th Anniversary
2015
“As a public university, we must ensure that talented students of all economic backgrounds have access to our programs. If the face of our campus does not reflect our society, we cannot fulfill our obligation to create the leaders of future generations.”

- Chancellor Richard Herman, 2004

The Illinois Promise program is a critical part of our mission here at Illinois. Graduates from the program create a ripple effect of hope in their communities so that others can imagine the promise that education brings.

- Chancellor Robert A. Easter, 2011

Since the first seventy-seven students stepped onto our campus and into history as our first class in 1868, the idea that higher education is a right, not a privilege, has been a University of Illinois hallmark. As a public, land-grant university, our doors are open to anyone with the will to learn and the commitment to do the hard work to succeed.

- Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise, 2014
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Students Served since I-Promise Program Began in 2005

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I-Promise Scholar
Graduation Rates 2005-2011 Cohorts

![Bar Chart showing graduation rates for 2005-2011 cohorts with 4-year, 5-year, and 6-year graduation rates for each year.]
Top Five Graduate/Professional Degrees Among I-Promise Scholars: 2010-2015*

*Graduate/Professional degrees earned at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

- Other, 34
- Human Resources & Industrial Relations, 16
- Accountancy, 15
- Social Work, 8
- Civil Engineering, 5
- Architecture, 5
In What Sectors Do I-Promise Alums Work?*

**Business – 63%**

*Example of titles*
- Analyst – Goldman Sachs
- District Sales Manager – Coca-Cola
- People Manager – Anheuser Busch Beverages
- Risk Consultant – Crowe Horwath, LLP
- Systems Engineer – Caterpillar

**Health Care – 14%**

*Example of titles*
- Foundation Coordinator – Presence Health
- Infection Control Practitioner – Sinai Health System
- Optometrist – Illinois Eye and Ear Infirmary
- Physical Therapist – Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago
- Registered Nurse – Hartgrove Hospital

**Higher Education – 13%**

*Example of titles*
- Coordinator, Student Leadership Development, Loyola University
- Director, CORE Program, University of Minnesota
- Policy Analyst – Center for Higher Education Enterprise, The Ohio State University
- Program Manager – Morehouse School of Medicine

**Non-Profit / Government – 10%**

*Example of titles*
- Development Coordinator – Girls on the Run
- Dance Artist – Atlantic Theatre Company
- Health Scientist – Center for Disease Control
- Middle School Social Science Teacher – Teach for America

*Based on an analysis of I-Promise Alumni LinkedIn Group Profiles (representing 27% of I-Promise graduates)*
When I first came to U of I, I had virtually no financial support, and I didn’t know what was going to happen my first semester. I was the first person from my family to go to college, and I was so overjoyed at the prospect of attending such a good school that I hadn’t given much thought as to how I or anyone else was going to pay for my education. No one—not my guidance counselors, my high school teachers, and certainly not my parents—had, given me any real advice in that area.

I used to sit in my dorm room and feel sick to my stomach at times, thinking that any minute someone would come knocking at my door, telling me it was time to pack up and get out since it was obvious I didn’t have the money to pay tuition.

I don’t remember how I learned about the Illinois Promise scholarship—I think they may have just given it to me—but it allowed me to stop living with such worry, with that gnawing, gut-wrenching stress that suffocates academic progress. I felt more like I belonged, like I was no longer hiding a secret and running from something. Along with a few excellent professors and peers at U of I, that scholarship helped me fulfill what I knew I was capable of.

My proudest accomplishment was going to graduate school and getting my master’s degree in Library and Information Science at Illinois, which has the top program in that field. Without the support of I-Promise, I would not have been able to do this, and my parents and grandmother would not have been able to see me walk across the stage in Foellinger Auditorium during graduation.

I’m glad to see that I-Promise is still around and supporting students as it did when I was there. I hope it continues to do so in the future regardless of budgetary problems, as there will always be people in the same situation that I was in, who have the ability but not the means to excel at a place like U of I.

Now, almost nine years after my first semester in the six-pack dorms, I live in Oakland, California and work as a librarian for San Francisco State University. I enjoy it out here, but I know what allowed me to get here in the first place, and I will never forget U of I and the generosity shown to me at a time when I needed it. Urbana-Champaign and the University will always be a place I call home.

Adam Mann

Current Title:
Assistant Librarian,
San Francisco State University

Undergraduate Degree:
B.A., Creative Writing, 2010

Graduate Degree:
Master of Science in Library and Information Science, 2013
There is no greater opportunity for growth and learning in embracing the unique stories of individuals. Fortunately for me, one of the great things about the University of Illinois campus is the diversity of its students and faculty. As an undergraduate, I had friends for whom settling on a major was the greatest challenge they faced in college. For the drive back to campus each year, their parents filled their cars with clothes, bedding, and other apartment necessities and didn’t leave until their refrigerators were properly stocked with nutritious foods. But I also had friends who struggled to strike a delicate balance between working multiple part-time jobs while still attending school full-time. Some didn’t have the luxury of being involved in extra-curricular activities or securing an unpaid internship in their desired field of study.

For me, the support of the Illinois Promise Scholarship program often meant the difference between having my fair choice of libraries to study in or desperately trying to think of new ways to maximize the time that had to be split between work and academic obligations. After all, the study rooms at the Undergraduate Library are a lot different than, let’s say, a busy breakroom of an off-campus fast-food emporium.

It was that very support from I-Promise that followed me across the Atlantic for a year-long cultural immersion program in France during my junior year—a year of growth and immense self-discovery unlike any other in my entire life. Not a day has passed since my return where I didn’t feel infinite gratitude for that opportunity. I-Promise played a major role in that decision. Through I-Promise, I was able to grant myself the audacity to believe that I deserved rich and fulfilling experiences.

Being an I-Promise scholar still greatly informs my everyday life and career goals. I-Promise has always upheld a strong sense of togetherness as we strive to create opportunities for all members of our community. Since graduating college, I’ve started to branch out into the field of non-profit charity work and have taken part in social justice reform within several local groups—decisions that were undoubtedly guided by some of Illinois Promise’s core ideals. As a recent graduate, I have come to realize that Illinois Promise is more than just need-based financial support. It is a large network of dedicated students, caring professionals, and generous donors all working to help level the playing field for future generations of students and thinkers. I-Promise says to its students that they are more than statistics and that they deserve a fighting chance to succeed. I still consider myself lucky to be a part of that message.
“As a first generation college student, I experienced a myriad of fluctuating emotions during my first couple weeks of school: guilt, excitement, anxiety, pride, extreme responsibility, embarrassment, confusion, and shame. These feelings were extremely overwhelming, exhausting, and detrimental to my studies and my health. Illinois Promise liberated me from this rollercoaster of emotions. In addition to helping with college expenses, Susan Gershenfeld and the Illinois Promise team helped me find stability and build a foundation to achieve my ambitions while at U of I. I-Promise helped me realize that I am not alone. I-Promise connected me to an inspirational and dedicated mentor. I-Promise pointed me to activities on campus and to valuable resources to assist me in my future endeavors. But most of all, Illinois Promise helped me realize who I am.”

I-Promise Scholar, 2009-2012
Cassandra Skenadore

Current Title:
Graduate Student

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Animal Science, 2013

Graduate Degree:
M.S., Animal Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015; Ph.D., Biomedical Sciences at Texas A&M University (in progress)

Highlights:

• Certified Professional Animal Scientist (PAS)

• Participant in the USDA's Student Diversity Program, manuscript under review
I am incredibly grateful for the I-Promise scholarship. I still remember crying my freshman year due to the fact that I could not afford to attend U of I. I thought all hope was lost. Then I was informed about the I-Promise scholarship. I was overwhelmed with joy, gratitude, and hope. I am a proud graduate of the University of Illinois, because of the financial assistance I received from this amazing scholarship. I will always hold those four years close to my heart as they helped me develop as a leader and individual. I was able to make friendships that will truly last a lifetime.

Upon graduation, I traveled to India to teach at Kodaikanal College. Being in India was a life changing experience. Working with college students in India further strengthened my passion for Higher Education. After a few months, I returned to my home in Chicago and worked as the Director of Day Camp at Rauner Family YMCA. I loved giving back to the Latino community in the West side of Chicago; however, I also knew that I wanted to work at a University and be a resource and support to college students. A year later, I left for Indiana to pursue my Masters in Student Affairs Administration at Ball State University. After completing my degree, I worked as the Director of Intercultural Programs at Taylor University in Indiana. Taylor granted me the opportunity to teach and to provide a safe space for multicultural and international students. After three years, my partner and I decided to move to Chicago to be closer to family. I have always been committed and passionate about leadership development, diversity education, inclusivity, and social justice. I wanted to continue that work and am now able to do it at Loyola University as the Coordinator for Student Leadership Development.

Cecilia O. Macias

Current Title:
Coordinator,
Student Leadership Development,
Loyola University

Undergraduate Degree:
B.A., Communication, 2009

Graduate Degree:
M.A., Student Affairs Administration at Ball State University, 2011
As I reflect on the experiences and achievements I’ve had, I know that without the I-Promise scholarship my life would be much different. I-Promise allowed me to enjoy my time at the university without the worry of finances. This enjoyment led me to experience new cultures, organizations, and hobbies. During my undergraduate career, I was able to seek out part-time work experiences and student organizations that helped me identify my interests and talents. I was able to focus on building a network of friends and colleagues who have been invaluable to me. Thanks to the mentors and leaders of I-Promise, I was able to explore various careers through one-on-one mentoring to career workshops.

I earned my bachelor’s degree in May of 2014, and I’ve been completing my master’s degree in Human Resources and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois. One of my proudest accomplishments was receiving my acceptance into the graduate degree program. This December, I will become the only member of my immediate and extended family to earn a master’s level education. I wouldn’t have had this opportunity had it not been for the vision in creating I-Promise, the generosity of I-Promise supporters, and the dedication of mentors and leaders like Susan Gershenfeld. I thank you all for recognizing and valuing our potential, even before we realized it ourselves.

I’m so proud of what I-Promise has become. I remember when I began five years ago; we were a handful of students compared to now. It’s amazing to see how much the scholarship has grown. I thank you for the gift you’ve given us. Not only has this scholarship helped individual students, but it has impacted our families, our friends, our communities, and the organizations we are a part of. I-Promise isn’t just a scholarship; it’s a tightknit organization that remains with you throughout and after your college tenure. I hope for continued success and progress for I-Promise over the years.
My personal struggle includes having been an undocumented student and feeling as if I would not be able to achieve my dream to go to college. The great opportunity to pursue higher education would not have been possible without the assistance and support of the I-Promise Scholarship. I declared business administration as my major because the program at Illinois is top ranked in the nation.

Although I was admitted to one of the best business programs, I still remember my initial anxiety that I would not be able to go to college. This, in conjunction with the fact that other students do not have this privilege, serves as motivation for me to continue pursuing higher education. My passion and experiences influenced me not to take the business route, but instead I am determined to assist college students, just how I-Promise has helped me and my peers.

I am currently pursuing my Masters of Education in Postsecondary Education Administration and Student Affairs at the University of Southern California. This past academic year I served as Residence Coordinator for the Office for Residential Education, where I supervised, trained, and evaluated nine Resident Assistants. This position allowed me to provide advice, support, assistance and referrals to over 330 students regarding academic, housing, personal, and other concerns. In addition, I adjudicated lower-level conduct cases in the residence halls and apartments using a learning outcome approach. Lastly, I served on the RA selection committee where I oversaw recruitment, marketing, and the interviewing and training of new RAs.

This upcoming year, I will be working with the Los Angeles Community Colleges serving as a Career Guidance Counselor Assistant. I will assist high school students as they apply to college helping them to make college a reality. The I-Promise scholarship has helped me obtain my dream and now I want to give back to future students who can benefit from resources like I-Promise.
Highlights:

Since graduation, I have had the opportunity to continue my education and challenge myself to make an impact in the field of health and healthcare. I hope to be an advocate for individuals that are not able to advocate for themselves. With my current involvement in research, I hope to help eliminate health disparities in low-income families with children with developmental disabilities by providing cost effective resources in their communities.
Mentors

Since 2009, over 550 mentors have volunteered in helping incoming I-Promise scholars transition to college.
“I-Promise has had a huge impact in helping me find my place here at this university. Yes, I came into college with a lot of statistics against me. But with the help of I-Promise and the administrators and donors who make it possible, I will succeed here, and I will leave this university a changed man.”

I-Promise Scholar, 2013 to present
Eden Gebregiorgis

Current Title:
Fundraising Team, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Undergraduate Degree:
B.A., Global Studies, Governance, and Conflict Resolution, 2014

Highlights:

• Travelled on the East and West Coasts to learn more about graduate programs
• Travelled to six European cities
During my time at the University of Illinois, the Illinois Promise program delivered much more than it promised. As a future educator, I also plan to make and keep important promises to my students, just as I-Promise did for me.

**U promised** me financial support, and you delivered. Without the assistance offered by I-Promise, I would not have been able to attend college. Throughout my four years, I was constantly reassured by a financial safety net that applied even when I moved out of the dorms, studied abroad, or incurred other educational expenses. I-Promise gave me a chance to get my feet wet at the beginning of freshman year when I couldn’t afford to purchase all of my textbooks right away. I-Promise helped me to have multiple steady jobs throughout college in places that were willing to work with my challenging class schedule.

**U promised** guidance, and you delivered. You delivered not only guidance, but a community in which I grew and thrived in as well. Not only was I able to get a degree, but I also grew into multiple leadership roles. I-Promise gave me a community in which I met wonderful people: students, faculty members, mentors, and donors. Each group of people offered a different type of tremendous inspirational support. Many donors have shared how they too started small right out of college and in time grew into generous and giving people that gave back to the communities that affected them. Mentorship was provided to me both formally and informally, whether it was through the I-Promise mentoring program, conversations with Susan, or as a mentor myself. I was matched with mentors and mentees in my field of study, and I learned a great amount from each person I interacted with. An I-Promise mentor who had been matched with another student graciously lent me a pair of hiking shoes for my study abroad trip to New Zealand to prepare for the rainy winter weather. Individual kindness is a consistent theme that has been prevalent in everyone I encountered through the I-Promise program, and this reinforces the I-Promise community that grows larger every year.

In the spirit of the I-Promise community, I will become a contributing member by pledging the following:

**I promise** to become an effective teacher, and I will deliver. I will take the education I received at the University of Illinois and use it to be a strong and positive influence on younger generations. My students will learn to work together as a vibrant community instead of individual contributors. I will spread the message of I-Promise and educate my students about the importance of kindness and support.
I promise to be sensitive to my students’ needs and to raise my students’ awareness to the needs of the rest of the world; I will deliver. I will never assume anything about a child because all of my students will come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, just as all of us in I-Promise came together. My students will express themselves, and I will listen. In turn, my students will learn to listen to others.

My bold dream is to have students that will grow to help others and strive to make a community that supports people in need. I want to see the message of I-Promise passed along from generation to generation as students work towards building a long-lasting community that benefits others in need and allows them to reach their full potential. I want my students to ask themselves, “What can I do to make the world a better place instead of asking what can the world give me?” I want to thank everyone from the bottom of my heart.

It is difficult to find words that can truly capture how significant of an impact I-Promise has had on my college and post-college experiences. Without the community and encouragement I-Promise provided, my current outlook and appreciation for life would be vastly different.

Because of I-Promise, I found a safe community of people I could relate to on a fundamental level. I-Promise provided me with resources, role models, and support. Each person I met inspired me to keep putting one foot in front of the other to achieve the best possible outcome. Throughout college and in my post-college years, I have felt deeply devoted to this community that has molded me into the person I am today.

Upon graduating from college, I found a position in my field as the Assistant Director of Bands at Wheeling High School in Wheeling, Illinois. I held this role for two years while maintaining a private clarinet studio and staying involved as much as possible with I-Promise. While staying busy is a welcome and comfortable state, being an I-Promise scholar taught me to always be reflective, especially at the most hectic of times. Self-reflection is critical for professional success and personal fulfillment. At regular intervals through my first year of teaching, I took note of my successes, failures, and personal changes. While it was a difficult realization to make, I came to the conclusion that my chosen career path would not be fulfilling in the long term. As a result, I am now pursuing a post-baccalaureate certificate in pre-medical studies from Northwestern University. With one more year left in the program, I hope to matriculate into medical school in the fall of 2017.

I-Promise now has a strong and growing alumni community. I hope that both new and old alumni can find a way to give back to the program that has sculpted all of us so profoundly. Our alumni community is unique and can provide continuing support for graduates of the program and current students. It takes only one person to have a vision, a dream, for a community; and this one vision has now impacted over 1100 individuals. As a proud member of this incredible group of alumni, I look forward to spreading the positive and powerful message of I-Promise. Having been lifted and bolstered by I-Promise for so many years, I am in a position to “pay it forward” with support, resources, and open arms for the younger generations to come.

“Give and you shall receive, much more than you would have ever thought possible. Give, give again and again, don’t lose courage, keep it up and go on giving! No one has ever become poor from giving!” – Anne Frank
As the youngest of six children growing up within a lower-class community on the West Side of Chicago, many would view these factors as negative circumstances. Honestly, I have to disagree. Although there may be negative factors within some of the circumstances in a particular area, great ideas, inventions, and people are created in the process. In some cases, the circumstance is not the leading factor that changes an individual; it is the opportunity that presents itself to the individual that creates the change. The opportunity that I am speaking of that has had such a positive impact on the lives of so many individuals is Illinois Promise.

With the help and leadership of both former Chancellor Richard Herman and Susan Gershenfeld, Illinois Promise has grown to be a primary resource for students within and outside of the program. Personally, with the assistance of I-Promise, I not only was able to receive financial aid through scholarships to help me pay for my education, but I was also mentored by an I-Promise alum who guided me through my collegiate experiences. I-Promise is a family that strives for the best from each individual, which in turn creates the best in our group—the best in our world.

Since graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I am proud to say that I am a full-time government employee within the Department of Justice. The experiences that I received at the University of Illinois are second to none. With regard to my hopes for I-Promise for the future, I want the program to continue to grow. So many lives have been positively impacted. Through the financial assistance, mentorship, or Joel’s excellent meals, students feel good about themselves, striving for what they can and will do to assist others who are less fortunate.

I-Promise is not solely a scholarship organization, but it is also a vow. A vow to be better as individuals, provide for others and to truly excel as a community. When things seem to be tough, I think on the promises that I have made for myself. They include:

- I-Promise to be the best that I can be.
- I-Promise to work hard.
- I-Promise to assist those less fortunate than myself in any way that I can.
- I-Promise to always view the glass as half full and not half empty.
- I-Promise to ask for assistance if needed.
- I-Promise to be honest.
- I-Promise to impact the world in a positive way.

Each of us has promises that we make to ourselves. Write a list and read it to yourself every morning. It may help you to remain positive and motivated. I hope that by sharing some of my experiences with you that you can understand the value of this program and each individual that is a part of it. Thank you Susan Gershenfeld and thank you Richard Herman!
During my four years as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, I had many memorable experiences. The day that I crossed the stage stands out the most, but I remember vividly what aided me along the way. The wealth of knowledge shared by the professors and faculty ensured I would be prepared to handle any obstacles. Additionally, the I-Promise program played a large role in giving me the opportunity to be a part of many experiences that I will never forget.

The college experience is unique because you have to drastically learn how to balance school work, finances, assimilating to student life, and often working a job. The I-Promise scholarship along with other awards that I received, put me in a financial position where I didn’t have to work. Instead, I was able to use this time to study for exams and getting involved in the community. Due to my participation in the 100 STRONG program, I was awarded a trip to Washington D.C to watch Barack Obama’s first inauguration. I was a part of various volunteer projects that sustained relations with local organizations and galvanized students to participate in activities that enriched the campus community. When struggling with subjects, I had the time to get additional assistance from tutors and my instructors. The I-Promise program provided me guidance and support that furthered my personal and professional growth. Because of the program, I had a wonderful college experience and was enabled to better myself not only from long hours of studying, but from helping others in that community.

Since college, I have worked primarily for healthcare organizations. I take pride in knowing that I support an organization that makes a difference in the lives of many. Continuing on my personal obligation to enrich the community, I joined the scholarship committee at my church. I facilitate workshops that teach college readiness and interviewing skills to college-bound students. Last tax season, I had the opportunity to volunteer for a tax assistance program for low-income families.

I hope that the I-Promise Program can continue to provide financial assistance to students, and preserve its unique ability to foster an environment in which students can network and build relationships with peers, mentors, and faculty. Many of the recipients will not have the opportunity that I have in thanking Dr. Herman for his continuous efforts. I’m truly grateful for being a part of this incredible program. It’s a testament to Dr. Herman’s legacy that he was able to establish a program that will continue to produce dedicated, successful, and intellectual alumni in the years to come.
“Applying to only one university is not wise. You need to have options to better your acceptance percentages.” These were the words from my high school counselor, Mrs. Fushi. The lucky university I was determined to attend was the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. My mind was set and there wasn’t any other university that intrigued me. I enjoyed watching the fighting Illini on television and seeing the amazing school spirit from the students. I could picture myself dressed in blue and orange walking through the quad or taking selfies with the Alma Mater. There was no obstacle I could not overcome to attend my dream university. I was okay with working two jobs to pay tuition in order to stay afloat, if necessary.

Anxiously, I received my acceptance letter, which I was very ecstatic about. I was in total shock and disbelief when I read that I was awarded a scholarship through Illinois Promise. I was so elated and proud of my decision. Most importantly, I was very thankful that I did not have to work multiple jobs in order to attend the university. There are no words that can express my gratitude towards Illinois Promise. My dream came true because of this scholarship and for that I am forever indebted.

Thankfully, this program allowed me to focus on my studies, which led to my graduation in four years as a mother. I was allowed breathing room and able to work for minor living expenses. There were many challenges I faced those four years, but I overcame them with the help of my peers. Illinois Promise has given me an opportunity to create great relationships that are secured today.
When I was in need of guidance or encouragement, there were many people for me to reach out to. I personally thank Susan Gershenfeld for always being available and creating many social events for the students to connect with each other. It was her belief in me along with the participation in Illinois Promise gatherings that she produced, which helped me through my lowest moments. I would not be an alumni today without her belief and commitment in this organization.

Illinois Promise provided endless opportunities to students. It also guaranteed a much needed support system. I can say without Illinois Promise I would not be the first graduate in my family. It was an amazing feeling to have my family and daughter in attendance at graduation. There are many young women I am able to mentor because of my accomplishment of beating statistics as a young mother.

Today, I am a repeated top performer as a rental branch manager for Enterprise Rent-A-Car. I have gained four promotions within three years as an employee. The networking and branding skills I learned from Illinois Promise has helped me tremendously. I would not have been able to hold conversations and gain friendships with my Rental Vice President or General Manager of Chicago without the help from Illinois Promise. This career opportunity has allowed me to have a comfortable living along with my husband and our three children. We will be proud first time home owners in September, 2015.
“After becoming involved in Illinois Promise, my life completely changed. I became an Ambassador for I-Promise, meeting with donors to share my experience at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and showing them that their donations made an immeasurable difference. I also started to excel in my courses, becoming more confident in myself and realizing that I deserved to be here like anyone else. I also blossomed into a leader, joining multiple organizations, volunteering more often and becoming a better-rounded individual while still balancing school and work. Most importantly, Illinois Promise opened me up to the idea of graduate school, something I had never contemplated.”

I-Promise Scholar, 2007-2011
The I-Promise Scholarship has helped me to accomplish some of my life goals that I would not have had the opportunity to do otherwise. I can still remember the summer before freshman year how worried I was with choosing a school and how I was going to afford it. I did not know whether or not I was going to be able to graduate, let alone from the university of my choice! After some hardships in my life, I lacked some of the necessary guidance, but once I received the I-Promise Scholarship, many of my worries faded and I was able to walk on that stage that I have always wanted. Along with the education I received, there was also a great mentoring experience that I have learned greatly from.

This scholarship opened doors for me that I would not have had. I was able to go to an amazing university where I had exceptional professors that I looked up to. I was able to focus on my academics as opposed to working full time while in challenging courses. Now that I have graduated, my student loans are not holding me back from accomplishing some of my dreams. I am focusing on starting a company as well as investing for the future. The I-Promise scholarship helped create lasting friendships and inspired me to try and start my own philanthropy. Being a part of such a great community, I was able to find myself as well as what I want out of life.

Some accomplishments I had since graduating is becoming a manager for the home office of James Stone and producing various events such as the Pilgrim Chamber Player’s Poolside Benefit. I also have been able to focus on the things that I love and accomplished some of my personal goals, whether they are through fitness or owning my own vehicle. I am currently establishing my networks in Chicago to be able to further my dreams and goals. The financial burden many of my classmates have is something that may have held me back from many things I am now able to do.

Once I establish myself as a young professional I would like to be able to give back to I-Promise. I would love to see I-Promise be more established in the Chicago-land area for alumni, current students, or other universities. The mentorship within the scholarship that I have received and beyond has been a big part of shaping me as an individual and I would love to be able to see that grow. The I-Promise Scholarship has been one of the greatest gifts I have received thus far in my life and I am so grateful for it.

Kris Siekierzynski

Current Title:
Office Manager/Executive Assistant,
J.H. Stone Consulting, Inc.

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Molecular and Cellular Biology, 2014
It is hard to articulate just how great an impact Illinois Promise made on my life. What words best describe the immense hope and promise that it gave me as I began my pursuit of a college education? Having seen my three older sisters, including one bright star who also attended The University of Illinois, begin and then drop out of college due to a lack of finances, I am under no illusion that it was guaranteed that I would finish my education simply because I was admitted. Illinois Promise made my big dreams a reality by enabling me to pursue my future. It granted me access to a top tier university and ensured that I had funding throughout my entire four years. This remarkable scholarship allowed me to devote time to studying hard to make strong grades during my undergraduate career. While I did work during my time as an undergraduate student, I did not have to be consumed by work, which allowed me to focus on my academic enrichment and leadership and extracurricular activities. Illinois Promise allowed me to be the first in my family to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

One of my proudest accomplishments was again being admitted to the University of Illinois in the Master of Human Resources and Industrial Relations Program in the School of Labor and Employment Relations. Due to the generosity of the Illinois Promise Scholarship allowing me to focus during my undergraduate studies, my strong grades were recognized with a substantial scholarship for my graduate education. My future plans include becoming a business leader in a Fortune 500 company. I plan to be a strong advocate for employees and remain passionate about holding business partners accountable to what is right. I am able to do this because of the passion and the promise that I received from Illinois Promise.

My hope for the future of I-Promise is that it remains a top priority because of its incredible impact, and that it continues to touch the lives of students who would have felt hopeless but for its generosity and the community of support that it provides. I hope that it continues to change the lives of its recipients for generations similar to how it has greatly touched my own.

Chancellor Herman, your vision and passion planted the seeds for my future. I am humbled by the magnitude of how you changed my life and encouraged by the good in you and people like you. The lives that I touch will forever be linked to you because of how you touched my life. Thank you for your promise into my future. Illinois Promise is an incredible scholarship of which I am sincerely and eternally grateful.

**Lhea L. Randle**

*Current Title:* Program Support Specialist, I-Promise Student Services

*Undergraduate Degree:* B.A. Honors, with High Distinction, Political Science and Communication, 2009

* Graduate Degree:* Master of Human Resources Industrial Relations (in progress)
I am grateful to donors and mentors who support Illinois Promise. Without the financial and mentor support from I-Promise, I would have left college more in debt than I am now. This type of individual and financial support is important for keeping low-income students in college. It ensures an equitable chance of success after graduation by not leaving them with a disproportionate burden of student loan debt. For low-income, first generation students, student loan debt is a real concern.

One of my proudest moments was being asked to speak with Senator Dick Durbin at the Union to bring attention to an issue that many low-income students face: the burden of student loans. I was proud to be able to lend my voice to an issue that is so personal to me.

I have several hopes for I-Promise. One, is that I-Promise remains a prominent program on the campus. A world class institution such as the University of Illinois can and should help to narrow the wealth gap in the nation by taking care of the needs of one of its most vulnerable populations. Secondly, I hope donors continue to understand the value of the program and their support continues. Lastly, I hope that I-Promise alums become donors and give back to a program that helped them realize their college dreams.

Mabinty Tarawallie

Current Title:
Teach for America 2015 Corp Member

Undergraduate Degree:
B.A., Sociology, 2011

Graduate Degree:
Master of Social Work, Minor in Women and Gender in Global Perspectives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014
As a recipient of the Illinois Promise Scholarship I was given four and a half years filled with opportunities. My time as an undergraduate was spent exploring topics and career paths, challenging classes, and defining myself as both a student and young professional. Since graduating with my bachelor’s degree, I have completed my master’s degree from The University of Notre Dame studying something I am truly passionate about, global health. Since graduating with my master’s degree, I have published my second scientific paper and presented a poster presentation at a world recognized global health association, The American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH). I am most proud of the time and journey I took as a student at Illinois. The I-Promise scholarship allowed me to stay an additional semester and acquire a second major, something that became foundational in the development of my career path and as a person. I now work at an acute-care hospital improving the quality of health care for patients in a resource-poor community. My long term goals include applying this knowledge to hospitals across the world. My hope for I-Promise is that it continues funding opportunities for those who could not otherwise attend Illinois. As an institution, Illinois is unparalleled in many majors offered and is an achievement that will withstand the test of time. As a recipient of this award, it has made me a better person as I am aware and engaged in contributing to opportunities like these for others. I-Promise has the ability to change a person, and I know it has for me!

**Macy Brusich**

**Current Title:**
Infection Control Practitioner

**Undergraduate Degree:**
B.S., Integrative Biology and Environmental Science, 2012

**Graduate Degree:**
M.S., Global Health (MSGH) at the University of Notre Dame, 2014
College. I was finally here. The cost was high. And yet that was the last thing on my mind. Thanks in part to a generous scholarship from I-Promise, money was not a concern, and I was free to pursue the academics and experiences that I desired.

Scholarships alone do not fully convey the impact I-Promise has had on me. The network and support system was absolutely critical for me to adjust to the university. Dinner etiquette, financial management, and all sorts of professional development that helped me grow, as well as a cohort of remarkable peers who inspired and challenged me. Because of our similar circumstances, I was able to connect and realize I was not alone, and that is the strength of I-Promise. With such a network, you can’t help but push for your dreams. Without this program, I would not have been able to take advantage of every opportunity that this university has, and that has not stopped even though I graduated.

Once I graduated, I was not ready to enter Physical Therapy, and traveled to clear my head, unplug, and do some serious thinking. No electronics in hand, I rented some books and set out for India, Germany, Kuwait, New York, and San Francisco. My education had not stopped; it increased tenfold. I recognized people that I wanted to stay in touch with, and goals that I wanted to accomplish. Coming to this self-realization was a pivotal point in my life, as now I had purpose. I knew how I wanted to live and what I wanted to do, and nothing would stop me.

After returning to America I started right away on my To Do List. I took an EMT class, began cooking, started meditating, and continued researching what it was that excited me. I didn’t have to look far. The University of Illinois had a phenomenal computer science program and boasted several entrepreneurs. I was lucky enough to meet several of them, and through them was invited to be a Consultant for EntreCORPS, an organization run through the College of Business that specialized in consulting for startups. Here my learning and exposure increased tenfold, as I met more CEOs and innovative individuals. I knew then that I wanted to work for or establish a tech startup.

Next? Well, learn the skills. I started spending more time at Grainger and Siebel Center, asked my CS friends for their notes, and enrolled in the leading web design boot camp in the nation, an Illinois startup called Designation. I spend all my time on e-lectures through Lynda.com using my Illinois login. I’m learning through Coursera, coding at the Chicago tech startup incubator, 1871, and am looking to get employed at a Chicago startup by fall. Afterwards, don’t be surprised if I pursue a master’s in CS.

I-Promise has a strong future because it invests more than money in its students. I look forward to helping students realize their dreams. Seize the moment, and live your life with passion.
Community Building

Annually, I-Promise scholars come together for the Chancellor’s Welcoming Reception, a spring BBQ, and a reception celebrating the success of the senior class. Other community-building events have taken place over the years.
Mauriell H. Amechi is the inaugural Director of the Community Outreach, Retention, and Engagement (CORE) Program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. In his new role, he oversees the planning, operation, and administration of the CORE 2025 Program – a high-touch early outreach, cohort pipeline program that aims to identify 500 high-achieving multicultural students with a specific and keen focus on male students. In addition, he coordinates the Huntley House for African American Men, a residential living-learning community that supports approximately 20 first-year students each academic year with the objective of creating a sense of belonging and facilitating opportunities for personal and academic growth.

Mauriell is also a Ph.D. candidate at UW-Madison in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (concentration in higher education administration). An emerging scholar-practitioner in higher education, with research interests that span three areas: (1) the stratification of college opportunity for foster youth and other underrepresented populations, (2) the role of school counseling and student support programs in postsecondary access, retention and completion, and (3) campus climate and its effect on diverse students. Earlier this year, he was inducted into the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.

Previously, Mauriell served as a research analyst for Wisconsin’s Equity and Inclusion Lab. His most recent publication – Navigating underrepresented STEM spaces: Experiences of Black women in U.S. computing science higher education programs who actualize success – appears in the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education (Volume 7, Number 3) (co-written with Lavar L. Charleston, Jerlando F. L. Jackson, Phillis L. George, and Jonathan Berhanu). He also coauthored a chapter in the upcoming book, Advancing Black male student success from preschool through PhD. Mauriell is also a member of several education professional associations, including the American Educational Research Association, the Association for the Study of Higher Education, and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

A Chicago native from the Lawndale and Garfield Park communities, Mauriell received his B.A. with high distinction from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and went on to study at The Ohio State University, where he earned a M.A. in higher education and student affairs as a Roy A. Koenigsknecht Graduate Alumni Fellow.
My name is Nick Musso, and I am a 2014 alum of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Wow. When I say these words I am flooded with feelings of both joy and sadness. I am filled with joy because I am reminded that all my hard work paid off. Yet I am filled with sadness because I am reminded of all the struggles my family has endured. Rooted deep within the fibers of that piece of paper framed on my bedroom wall are stories that hurt my heart, but fuel my ambition.

The I-Promise program has exposed me to many students that share similar journeys. If there is one way I-Promise has impacted me, it was the comfort of having an understanding support system throughout my undergraduate education. The students understood the struggles I had. The mentors understood the guidance I needed. The director, Susan Gershenfeld, understood the amount of love it takes to run such a successful program. All the while the donors understood that their hard-earned funds were making a difference in America’s future. Without this strong community, my life may be totally different than it is now and attending Illinois may not have been my reality.

Today I am serving with AmeriCorps and giving back to a society that has invested so much in me. My year-long program is through EarthCorps, an independent non-profit based in the city of Seattle. Our focus is restoring forests and parks throughout the Puget Sound region by removing invasive species, planting natives, and engaging the community. At this point in my career, I am thinking of becoming a park ranger. Gaining hands-on experience with conservation and community outreach are important for this position, and I hope to soon further my education by attending the University of Washington for a Master of Public Administration. My education has been the path to success, and I would like to extend a big thank you to everyone involved in the I-Promise program for investing in me. Congratulations, I-Promise, on your 10th anniversary and may you carry on many more successful years!

Nick Musso

Current Title:
Corps Member,
Earth Corps

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, 2014
It wasn’t until a few weeks ago, when I moved into my own apartment in Uptown, Manhattan that I felt like I finally made it. It’s been a long time for a guy like me. I came from a home where I couldn’t afford to pay a few dollars for a field trip in the 7th grade because my dad was incarcerated, and my mom didn’t work. It also didn’t help that we lived in one of the worst parts of Chicago’s Southside, right outside of Englewood, up until I was 16. I had to get out, I wanted better for myself and my future wife and kids. This was what I was dreaming about at a very young age. Thanks to the I-Promise scholarship, I was able to reach those dreams and much more. I certainly feel like I owe much of my accomplishments to the opportunity the scholarship granted me.

I struggled my first few years in college. But I was determined to leverage my campus connections. With harsh pursuit, I landed a fantastic internship on a survey research team. The team works under a grant from the National Science Foundation looking to align the stakeholders of a worldwide geographic information system. Hopefully, aligning these great minds can lead to the research we need to change the world.

Through the people I met at Illinois, I got an opportunity with the Cleveland Indians to do business analytics. Here, I built a model that increased the predictive accuracy of their full price ticket sales. Finally, I was able to leverage my gained experience to get a third internship that year with the city government practicing operations management. It is also worth mentioning that I, as president of my fraternity, lead the Greek lettered organization out of dark financial times and secured long-term housing. This merited me the Jean F. Hill award from the campus community. By the end of my college career, I had a great resume, a great major/minor combination, and a unique set of skills.

I am now a Data Analyst conducting large-scale data management, statistical research, and business intelligence application development. In the current state of society’s climate revolving around big data, analytics, and data science, I couldn’t be happier. These accomplishments could not be made possible without the support of the I-Promise. Thanks to this wonderful scholarship fund, a young boy with big dreams was able to reach them and become the man I am today.

I hope that in the future I can become a donor. This way, I can help ensure future opportunities can be given to students like myself. I also hope to become an alumni mentor for the program when I move back to Illinois. Of course, if I ever come across an I-Promise scholar in the professional world, I will certainly reach out with a helping hand in any way I can.
I received the I-Promise scholarship when I was a sophomore in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Illinois. With this scholarship, I was able to avoid working to pay for my college tuition, housing, and food. Instead I invested the time that I would have otherwise spent working, doing undergraduate research, which later formed the basis of my current Ph.D. research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In addition to research, this scholarship allowed me to spend most of my time on my coursework. Consequently, I was able to maintain a high GPA as an undergrad and graduate with Highest Honors. This facilitated my admittance to one of the highest ranked graduate Civil Engineering programs in the nation, where I am currently a Ph.D. candidate. The aforementioned are the most important items that I believe I would not been able to accomplish if I was not awarded the I-Promise scholarship. My hopes for the future of I-Promise is that it keeps up the good work, and continues to support and encourage the bright minds to pursue a college education.

Proudest Accomplishments after Graduation

- Admission to the graduate Civil Engineering program at Illinois to pursue of a Ph.D. in one of the most selective Civil Engineering programs in the country
- Passing Preliminary Examination required by CEE department to formally be considered a Ph.D. candidate
- Teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in Structural and Foundation Engineering
- Contributing to a Research Idea Proposal entitled “Modified Standard Penetration Test-Based Drilled Shaft Design Method for Weak Rocks” that was awarded a funding of $669,313 by the Illinois Center for Transportation and Illinois Department of Transportation
- Co-authoring a class textbook that is currently in use as the main reference text for CEE480 at the University of Illinois Civil Engineering Department
- Reviewing technical paper submissions submitted to the Journal of Geotechnical and Geo-environmental Engineering
As a proud alum of the University of Illinois, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the I-Promise scholarship.

As a direct result of the financial burden that was lifted because of I-Promise, I was allotted the time to learn and excel at playing Rugby at U of I. During my stay I was awarded Rookie of the Year in 2006, and later Most Valuable Player in 2010. I worked extremely hard on and off the field, and I was fortunate that the labor of my work did not go in vain. Rugby like many other organizations in college is all about nurturing lasting relationships. After graduation, I was blessed to gain employment at Baxter Healthcare as a Quality Consultant. The hiring manager just so happened to be the father of one of my fellow rugby players, a player who knew well what kind of hard, determined, and prompt worker that I was. Thus, I owe so much to I-Promise for giving me the opportunity to show the world what type of qualities I have to offer.

Currently I am a 3rd year student at Avalon University School of Medicine who also is involved in clinical research working with patients with diabetes. I plan on pursuing a career as a cardiologist. The rate of individuals who suffer from heart attacks, diabetes, obesity, and other maladies in this county is unacceptable. As a physician, I believe I can really give aid where aid is needed the most. Despite being as ambitious as I am, medical school has not been easy. I was fortunate to recently have dinner with Susan Gershenfeld who has infused me with the courage and the fortitude to continue school despite adversities. Years after graduating, the leadership of I-Promise still takes the time to check on me. I-Promise as an entity has been amazing at not only making sure its participants obtain great grades, as an organization they transform ordinary people into prominent members of society.

Looking to the future, I would hope that others are allotted the opportunity to not only gain an amazing education but just as importantly the chance to find and nurture those lasting relationships that are essential in being successful in today’s society.

Quinn Doriety

Current Title:
Student

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Psychology, 2011

Undergraduate Degree:
M.D., Avalon University School of Medicine (in progress)
The Turning Point of My Story

My mom’s tear-filled eyes smiled when I told her I would be attending the University of Illinois. When I said I would graduate with minimal debt, she looked up and whispered, “Thank You.” The Illinois Promise Scholarship solidified the faith my mom instilled in me by reassuring me that my past will not define my future. It also gave me the confidence to embrace my story and the boldness to tell the stories of others.

Before I graduated high school I got accepted to the University of Illinois, but I spent the summer worrying about how I would pay for college. I had barely survived a life of poverty and had no savings. My mom told me to believe that everything would be okay. I did. Just a few weeks before classes started I received an unthinkable award letter. Because of the I-Promise Scholarship, I no longer had to worry about taking out tens of thousands of dollars in loans.

Once I started classes, I realized that I was not only attending a top ranked school, but I would also receive a supporting community. Susan, I-Promise mentors and fellow scholars have taught me how to navigate the endless resources the University of Illinois has to offer. They also made me feel comfortable with my background by sharing their relatable stories. It made take heed to my mom’s advice: Never be ashamed of your story. You never know who can relate.

Although every statistic says I shouldn’t be standing here right now, I-Promise didn’t see that. I-Promise has given me the confidence to tell my story proudly – because I know I will never go back. I can boldly say I used to starve at night; I went days without hot water; I attended seven different primary schools and I have buried teenage friends. No longer will middle class counterparts look at me as if I’m an animal because I don’t have the resources they have. No longer do I feel like less of a person because I lack necessities. Now I can confidently look my niece in the eyes and say, “You can make it out of poverty, too. Your dream of becoming an astronomer can come true.”

(Continued on following page...)
Next month I will graduate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a Bachelors of Science in Broadcast Journalism and a minor in Anthropology. As a journalist I will also tell the stories of the underrepresented – so people can believe in them and understand that they are people too, not animals. And I promise to believe in the endless opportunities for people just like me.

My story was written long before I was cultivated in my mother’s womb. It’s been a story of gloom, lack and insecurity, but I-Promise turned it around. I-Promise is the pivotal point of my life. This turning point signifies that there are loving people in the world who care. And as a journalist I promise to care, acknowledge, report, speak out against injustices and be a voice for those who feel unworthy simply because they lack resources. I Promise to tell our story and continue to care for others as I-Promise has cared for me.

Since graduation Rachel has been living in Houston, TX. She just started her second year as a first grade teacher.

Future goals: She plans to teach for another year and then go to graduate school for broadcast journalism. She also hopes to launch her own blog soon.
The I-Promise scholarship has been a critical component to my success, not only during my four years of undergraduate studies at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, but during my Clinical Psychology graduate studies at Roosevelt University. I would never have thought that the scholarship would help me beyond my undergraduate years, but that is just how vast the scholarship’s impact turned out to be. Personally, the mentoring component of the scholarship’s available services was quite beneficial. During my first two years, I was mentored by my senior I-Promise peers and during the latter two years, I was able to mentor incoming I-Promise students to help share what I called the “What I Wish I Knew List.” I was also mentored by Sue Stock, an alumnus of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who was involved in I-Promise. Almost six years later, she remains a wonderful mentor to me throughout the different chapters I have embarked on in my life.

After obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Minor in South Asian and Islamic studies, I went on to pursue a master’s degree in Clinical Psychology (Counseling Practice). During my graduate studies, I continued to build my skills and career interest in Higher Education as a Hall Coordinator for the newest edition to the Chicago skyline, “The Wabash Building.” I recently accepted a position as Clinician II with Community Elements, where I will be furthering my current Licensures (Licensed Professional Counselor and National Certified Counselor).

My hopes for the future of the I-Promise scholarship is to increase the scholarship’s ability to help more incoming freshman students and retain a stronger network during the students’ university careers. In addition, the formulation and strengthening of the I-Promise alumni network can be a power source of knowledge pertaining to the benefits of mentoring that can occur between current students and alumnus, resulting in a sustainable resource.

**Ranya Hasan**

*Current Title:*
Clinician II, Community Elements

*Undergraduate Degree:*
B.S., Psychology, Minor South Asian and Islamic Studies, 2012

*Graduate Degree:*
Clinical Psychology (Counseling Practice), Credentialed in Clinical Family and Child Therapy, 2015
The I-Promise scholarship will always hold a special place in my life. It is the pivotal moment when I met so many outstanding and bright individuals, experienced great personal growth and accomplished many goals. One of which will stay with me forever is based on this quote:

“I will always look up to you. Very proud of you”

That phrase was written inside a Congratulations Graduate card my little brother handed me after my graduation. That phrase will stay with me forever. Growing up in a low-income family, and after the passing of my father, I wanted to take matters into my own hands and provide a better life for my family. As the first person in my family to graduate college, I wanted to BE that role-model, that father-figure ... someone my little brother could look up to. That phrase reassured me that I have accomplished the biggest milestone in my life. I-Promise has made it happen.

I want to thank I-Promise for all the help and support it provided. My hope is that I-Promise be implemented in other universities – there are so many deserving and outstanding individuals out there that will benefit from all of its resources. I-Promise changes lives – one success story at a time.

Renato Yutuc

Current Title:
R&D – Chemical Process Engineer, ELANTAS PDG, Inc.

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, 2014
Ambassadors

*I-Promise scholars advance the scholarship program by serving as ambassadors.*
**Highlights:**

Recently, I earned a doctorate from The Ohio State University. My dissertation focused on the relationship between Black males’ early contact with the criminal justice system through arrest and their probability of enrolling in a four-year college, using a nationally representative sample of Black males who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1997).
My name is Sarah Huang. After spending four and a half year on this beautiful campus, I proudly received my Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering. I-Promise was where I started my wonderful journey, and I am forever grateful for the program’s support.

Whether I am a first generation college student is debatable. My dad went to a three-year college in China, but as you can imagine, the entire college system is different. I moved to Chicago from China the summer before my junior year of high school. I knew little about America, even less about American colleges; I only knew one thing, and that is education can change my future. I share this with you because I have no other way to describe how confused and in despair I felt before I entered college. Gratefully, I-Promise shed light on this for me. I still remembered that the I-Promise freshmen welcoming reception was the first event I attended.

The I-Promise program is an excellent program, and it is solely student-centered: it covers financial support to campus community engagement to freshmen survival tips to career advisories. For me, the best “promise” offered by this program is the financial support. I was able to focus on my studies instead of taking multiple part-time jobs. Even after I switched majors into Chemical Engineering, which included a $5000 increase in tuition, I-Promise still held its full-ride promise.

Within the I-Promise community, there are people who care. I made friends with other I-Promise scholars including, two who became my roommates. I also had an awesome mentor. She openly shared her first-year experience with me and encouraged me to be brave and get involved. I followed her advice and didn’t regret a single decision I made. These decisions included travelling to Haiti for TLUD biomass stove design and implementation, conducting a sustainable market development research project in India, holding and an environmental consulting internship in China.

I-Promise continued to help me as I walked out the gate of college. When I was looking for a full-time job during my last semester, I got to a point where I had to decide if I should accept a job offer from my internship company or wait for my dream company. Knowing that the work I did during my internship did not suit my career interest, I ended up deciding to take a chance and wait. If there was no I-Promise, I would have had no choice but to accept a “job” instead of a career, simply because I needed a job to pay off a large amount of loans.

I wrote this to let you know how much I appreciate the program I-Promise, but my words are certainly not enough to describe how it had transformed my life. Thank you for this amazing scholarship and full-filling the promises.
Ten years ago, Chancellor Richard Herman began setting his vision into place. As he eloquently put it that, “As a public University, we must ensure that talented students of all economic backgrounds have access to our programs.” From there a seed was planted, a plan was set into motion, and thousands of future lives would forever be changed. College tuition now had a new viable option for low-income families; dreams were being realized.

I-Promise has provided a multitude of resources, friendships and memories in so many lives, my own included. First and foremost, it has helped to earn degrees. Coming from a background where finances were difficult and paying for college seemed like an impossibility, I-Promise gave many students a chance that might not have been possible otherwise. While the financial support is such a huge part of what I-Promise is known for providing, there is an even larger portion given through friendships and mentorships. A price cannot be put on having a group treating you like family on your first week away from home. When you’re a student among thousands, to have a mentor to guide you and show care and compassion is priceless. I have so many cherished memories of baking Valentine’s Day cookies, kayaking at the Gershenfeld’s house, and having lunch with my I-Promise mentor, that all made my college experience that much richer and more valuable. I wouldn’t be where I am today without those experiences and without I-Promise.
I have accomplished so much that I can be proud of since my matriculation from the University of Illinois. I have moved out of state on my own to Tampa, FL, gotten my own apartment, and started a position as an entry-level engineer working with a firm directly involved in my field. So many of these accomplishments are obstacles for new alumni these days, but thanks to resources through I-Promise, I am living the life that I never would have dreamed possible from my background. I have independence and the beginning of a career under my belt when ten years ago I didn’t even know whether or not I would have a bed to sleep on. I am proud to say I have a future.

It was estimated in December of 2004 that 125 students would be eligible for I-Promise’s services. Now as we are approaching December of 2015, that number is only a fraction of the lives that are being impacted by this magnanimous organization. I hope to only see that develop and flourish for future students, future generations, and future lives. To know that one day no student will have to worry about the additional debt of tuition as an obstacle between them and the education that they crave and require for their life is a dream worth pursuing whole-heartedly. I personally thank I-Promise, Richard Herman, and all the staff and supporters of this organization for the hard work and dedication put into realizing this dream; this dream that came true for me.

With ten solid, generous years, Richard Herman’s vision has become a reality that has impacted this University greatly. There is hope, there is love, and there is growth like never before to a population of young, bright individuals who needed it so desperately. I am honored to have been a part of this organization, and I look forward to watching and supporting its growth in the future. Ten years down is just the tip of the iceberg; thousands of lives impacted and given hope, let’s make it millions.
Looking back, I-Promise has helped me gain a career in my life through financial support. As someone who came from a low-income family, I saw how my parents struggled to come to America and let their children have a good education. They consistently worry how to provide for their children; I-Promise helped resolve this problem for my parents. I would not have been able to attend a top university and graduate with the degree I desired. In addition, I-Promise prepared me for my future way ahead of time as I did not even plan to attend graduate school when I came in as a freshmen.

I believe one of my proudest accomplishments since graduating from college is being able to build and keep up with the relationships I made at Illinois. The people I met have also shaped me into the person I am today. The community and the culture are amazing with the support I received throughout my time at the University of Illinois. I-Promise has helped me better transition and fit into the community. I am proud of the friends I made because they have also contributed greatly to my degree. When it came to group work, there needed to be a team to finish off strong on a project and so the people I worked with were very dependable and I was able to achieve the grade I wanted. I would not be who I am and where I am today without those people I have met either through I-Promise or anywhere at the University of Illinois.

My hope for I-Promise in the future is for them to continue on being the best of the best. I hope that I-Promise can continue providing for those who are in need of financial support because the students are truly grateful as I have seen throughout the years. The smiles on each student’s face showed a lot on how thankful they are because of I-Promise. I-Promise has been doing such a great job in reaching out to students no matter what the circumstances are. I hope future I-Promise alumni will always remember to give back and appreciate what was given to them as much as I do.

Sherry Xiao

Current Title:
Graduate Student

Undergraduate Degree:
B.S., Psychology, 2014

Graduate Degree:
Master of Human Resources Industrial Relations (in progress)
A Continuing Promise

I want to begin this essay by expressing my deepest gratitude to Dr. Herman for believing in the value of supporting young people, like me, in their educational endeavors. I am the first in my family to graduate college, and to attend grad school. Education has always been incredibly important for both me and my family. My mother and sister have supported me on this journey to the best of their capacity because they knew that this was an important step for me to take. I knew this was an important step for me to take because my dream and goal as a first generation graduate has always been to gain access to the resources needed for me to do what I love and be able to comfortably provide for the needs of my family at the same time.

Access to higher education would have been a tremendous challenge if it weren’t for the financial and community support of programs like Illinois Promise. I always love to talk about how this scholarship has been more than just monetary support. It has felt like, a promise. It has felt like family. It has been a gracious reminder that I am not alone and that others also share a commitment to my education. It has meant that other people have also put their hearts, confidence, and financial support into ensuring the success of students like me. I have seen this as both a blessing and a responsibility.

Since graduating, I have taught in classrooms, community spaces, after school programs, in college spaces, museums, and galleries. I have pursued a masters in Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, writing and producing work related to the power of community, arts, and social justice curriculum. What I mean to say is, I have had the blessing of practicing what I love with other people and to engage conversations around praxis, possibility, and social justice. I have the privilege to engage with people in making meaning through art and personal interaction. I continue to share learning experiences from and with the people I work with. I now share a promise with many others that will always lead me back to the kindness, mentorship and support I have received throughout my own educational career. I have a deep-felt commitment to being the kind of promise that supports and cares for the people I engage with as an educator on a daily basis. The gratitude abounds. Thank you, Dr. Herman, I-Promise community, and supporters for your work and dedication.
Study Abroad

*I-Promise Scholars have explored the world through Study Abroad during their time at Illinois.*
My name is Tiffany Au, and I graduated in 2013 with a bachelor’s degree in advertising and minor in business. There would never be enough paper in this world to explain the monumental impact that I-Promise had throughout my college years. Entering freshman year of college I was full of anxiety, fear, and doubt. With only a handful of friends, I thought making such a large place feel like home would be nearly impossible.

All uneasy feelings were settled when Susan Gershenfeld introduced me to my mentor, Bob Holly. Bob was more than a mentor; he was a true and genuine friend. He gave me tools and resources to help me assimilate to my “new life” as seamlessly as possible. He was open and honest, and shared his personal mistakes with me to help guide me to the right path. Bob was someone that I looked up to, and the comfort net I needed when making the transition.

After finishing my first year, I had a better understanding not only for the college culture but mostly myself. I knew exactly what I wanted and the necessary steps that I needed to take in order to achieve it. I was also ready to step into the shoes of my mentor and acquire mentees of my own: Miss Rachel Christine and Breana Burden. Ambitious, passionate and dedicated girls, I was beyond fortunate to have young women who were so confident and dream chasers. Having these two reach out to me and admire me for my work and dedication is a feeling I cannot describe. I have always dreamed as a little girl to be a role model for others.

Susan Gershenfeld. I believe her name alone can stand as a sentence. Powerful, caring, passionate, and inspiring: everything she had made the I-Promise program to be. I learned how to communicate effectively, build genuine relationships, be an advocate, voice my weaknesses and push to overcome them with my strengths because of her. She constantly opened her home for gatherings with mentors and mentees, she treated me to lunches and dinners as an excuse to catch up and make sure that she was doing everything she could to help. She built an organization that I admire deeply and only hope to replicate in other educational programs.

After graduation I moved to Los Angeles in hopes to building a platform where the voices from amazing organizations like I-Promise and other non-profits can be heard. Leveraging my business knowledge and passion in giving back, I currently serve as the Director of Development and Community Relations for a non-profit called, True-Connections. Our mission is to create universal practices of connection to empower youth in building stronger communities. We introduce creative arts and guided meditations as a tangible way for students to practice values like love, forgiveness, and collaboration. I look to not only be a lifetime mentor for the youth, but for my peers. I strive to be the role model Susan is to me. Thankful and blessed for all my opportunities, connections, and mentors; my success is a reflection of their inspiration.

**Tiffany Au**

**Current Title:**
Director of Development and Community

**Undergraduate Degree:**
B.S., Advertising, Minor Business, 2013
After graduation, I decided that I wanted to put my education to use and do something I love, which is travelling and experiencing the world. When I left the USA, I didn’t know where I would end up or what I would be doing. I set a rule for myself that I would spend a minimum of 5 years outside of the USA, and not return until I’ve stopped (or significantly slowed down) developing my career and lifestyle as an global citizen. By chance, on September 2014, I ended up at the biggest e-commerce fashion company in Indonesia (and all of South East Asia), called ZALORA, as an entry level planner. Within 3 months, I was promoted to manager, and within 6 months again promoted to department head and VP. As of, August 2015, I moved to Singapore to begin my journey with the Global Fashion Group, the parent company that ZALORA Indonesia operates under along with 26 other countries, as project manager, helping develop the fashion e-commerce industry across all of the ventures around the world.

*Picture: In front of the iconic “Merlion” (half mermaid, half lion) in Singapore.*
Awards and Recognition

The Richard & Susan Herman Essay Award is provided annually to a senior who is recognized for composing a compelling essay that is then delivered during the Senior Reception. I-Promise has been recognized by Rainbow PUSH Coalition and Annual Citizen Education Fund – Award (2009) and WISCAPE (Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education) – recognized I-Promise as one of three exemplary postsecondary opportunity programs for improving college access, persistence and success (2010).