

Policy Brief

COLLEGE PROMISE

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Sauk Valley's College Promise – From Pancakes to Rural Revitalization

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Introduction

A pancake breakfast foundation can be a wonderful asset to a community college, capable of supporting meaningful student scholarships, building goodwill in the community, and providing valuable marketing for the college. Rarely, however, will a pancake breakfast foundation raise sufficient funds to endow a Promise Program that can transform the economic development of a college's region. The Sauk Valley College Foundation (Foundation) has evolved from a pancake breakfast foundation to one that has launched an endowed Promise Program, which the region's youth see as a realistic path to earning a college degree and the community embraces as a cornerstone of regional economic revitalization.

The Foundation was established in 1965 as an independent 501c3 whose mission is to help broaden the educational opportunities and services available to students of Sauk Valley Community College (SVCC) and to the community at large. Established just months before the Foundation, SVCC

serves six rural counties in northwest Illinois with a population of 100,000. Its student unduplicated headcount is 1,500, 94% of whom are at risk, i.e., they are low income, first-generation, and/or have a disability. SVCC's region is typical for much of rural America: 50% of high schools students are low income and not college ready and 31% have not enrolled in college a year after leaving high school; 20% of adults have no high school diploma or equivalent and 70% have no college degree; workforce participation is 64%; per capita income is 10% below the state average and 14% below the national average; and the population has decreased 10% in the last ten years.



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Dr. David Hellmich
President

David Hellmich began his tenure as the President of Sauk Valley Community College in 2015. Prior to coming to SVCC, he served 28 years as an administrator and English professor at community colleges in Florida, Minnesota, and Kentucky. David has taught graduate courses and has published on the topic of ethical leadership in community colleges. He earned his bachelor's degree in English from DePauw University, his master's degree in American Literature from Indiana University, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Florida.

In 2016, a political faceoff between the Illinois Governor and the Speaker of the House resulted in a prolonged state budget impasse that cost SVCC millions in state revenue and prompted the college and Foundation to seek ways to increase student access and shield the college from the state's political whims. Together, they researched and committed to a Promise program, branded as the Impact Program, that is tailored to the needs of the local communities. SVCC's Impact Program began in 2021 with a two-community pilot and launched throughout the college's six counties in 2022. In the process of refining and initiating the Impact Program, the Foundation increased its net assets by over 270% and the college doubled its commitment to the Foundation.

Impact Program and Campaign Overviews

The mission of SVCC's Impact Program is to harness the collective power of Sauk Valley partners and communities to create an effective, supportive, and sustainable path for students to pursue a college education and achieve career success through lifelong learning, public service, and economic advancement.

Impact is a tuition-earned program. It is not a free college program but a promise of a college education. Every K-12 student in the six county district (home-school students, private-school students, and public-school students) is eligible to earn tuition and fees for up to three years at SVCC or until they earn their certificate or degree, whichever comes first. Students must register for the program by September 1 of their freshman year; progress with the rest of their class (i.e., graduate on time or early), participate in 25 hours of community service per year in high school; graduate from a high school or home school program located within the SVCC district; apply for at least one local, state, or national scholarship; and complete the FAFSA or the FAFSA forecaster. To remain in the program after being admitted to SVCC, students must be enrolled in a certificate, degree, or transfer program; maintain good academic standing; and complete 25 hours of community service per year. Impact is a last-dollar program, meaning federal and state financial aid and all scholarships are applied to a student's account before the Foundation covers the remaining tuition and fees.





Dr. Lori Cortez
Dean of Institutional
Advancement

Lori Cortez began her tenure at Sauk Valley Community College in 2014 as the Director of TRIO Student Support Services and became the Dean of Institutional Advancement in 2017. She has led SVCC teams in securing two TRIO SSS grants (\$2.9 million) and a Title III grant (\$1.9 million) and has grown the Foundation's net assets from \$3.1 million to \$11.5 million in four years. Lori has taught at Mid Michigan College since 2008 and has presented nationally on college promise programs. She earned her associate's degree at Delta College and bachelor's degree, master's degree, and Ed.D. from Central Michigan University.

Impact Program Coordinators meet with elementary and middle school principals and advisors to educate them about the program, and they meet with elementary and middle school students and guardians to promote the program. These coordinators, along with program volunteers, work with organizations throughout the region to identify student volunteer opportunities. These opportunities and the tracking of these opportunists are maintained in a Foundation database. A smartphone app and a web portal connect to this database.

The five-year \$10 million Impact Program Endowment Campaign began in 2021 with the formation of the Campaign Cabinet consisting of ten prominent community leaders who have affluence and/or influence and who believe in the community benefits of the Impact Program. Members of this cabinet meet quarterly. They are vital public stewards of the endowment campaign. The quiet phase of the campaign is scheduled to end in 2023 with a goal of having raised \$7 million – \$4 million have been raised to date with another \$5 million estate gift. The campaign pursues multi-pronged funding sources including private donors, businesses/corporations, foundations/charitable giving, and municipalities.

Analysis and Discussion

Community interest in the Impact Program was widespread from the start. This interest was not surprising since SVCC had cultivated broad community support over the years, as confirmed by Goettler Associates, who found that 97% of the interviewees offered their favorable, and often very favorable, opinions of SVCC. This interest, however, did not often translate into optimism that the multimillion dollar endowment campaign would be successful. Most community members offered only tempered encouragement, and some openly worried the Impact Program Endowment Campaign would hurt other worthy causes in the Sauk Valley by drawing away critical contributions. They saw the fundraising pie as fixed and Impact threatening to take too big of a slice from this pie. What they – and perhaps everyone – missed was the power of the Impact Program's clear and compelling mission.

In April of 2021, an anonymous donor made a \$1 million gift to the Foundation to endow the Impact Program for students in Fulton and Prophetstown, IL. Prior to making this gift, SVCC and the Foundation had no relationship with the donor, and she was not on the potential donor list. She was looking for a worthy cause and asked her community's public school superintendent for advice. SVCC had a long-standing relationship with this superintendent, and he had been an enthusiastic contributor in shaping the Impact Program. He recommended the donor talk with SVCC's Dean of Institutional Advancement. The power of the Impact Program's clear

and compelling mission resulted in the donor making the largest donation (to date) in the Foundation’s history, a donation that expanded the fundraising pie in the Sauk Valley. This power resulted in a second anonymous donor making what will be the Foundation’s largest donation, a \$5 million estate gift that will endow the Impact Program for Lee County students. This power has resulted in stretch gifts made by several college, community, corporate, and municipality donors. And this power was on full display April 19, 2021, when the First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, and Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel Cardona, in addition to Congresswoman Cheri Bustos, Governor J. B. Pritzker, Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton, Attorney General Kwame Raoul, and local officials visited SVCC to celebrate the Impact Program.

Community members are energized by the power of the Impact Program’s mission for different reasons. Some focus on every child in the Sauk Valley being able to access higher education; others focus on the community service that will teach youth about their community and the value of volunteerism while providing organizations with a legion of volunteers; and others focus on the economic development revitalization that comes with having a large home-grown pool of skilled college graduates available for employment. Regardless of the focus, the Sauk Valley community embraces the impact of this rural community college promise program.



Calling all organizations in the Sauk Valley area! We are looking for community partners to build our volunteer opportunities for our students.

We need you!

Contact us at impact@svcc.edu
@svccimpact

College Promise is a national, non-partisan, non-profit initiative that builds broad public support for funding the first two or more years of postsecondary education for hard-working students, and ensuring those students have access to quality educational opportunities and supports.

Learn more at: collegepromise.org or email info@collegepromise.org

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