



13th Annual College Success Forum

Tuesday, February 10, 2026

UPMC Events Center

Robert Morris University

AGENDA

8:30 – 9:00 AM	Registration/Networking <u>Refreshments sponsored by United Way of Southwestern PA</u>
9:00 – 9:15 AM	General Welcome – Amy Kotzev , President, Western PA College Success Roundtable
9:15 – 9:45 AM	Keynote Speaker – AJ Jefferson , President and Chief Executive Officer, Homeless Children's Education Fund
9:50 – 10:35 AM	Breakout Session 1
10:35 – 10:55 AM	Snack Break Refreshments provided by the Pittsburgh Promise
10:55 – 11:40 AM	Breakout Session 2
11:45 – 12:30 PM	Breakout Session 3
12:35 – 1:10 PM	Networking Lunch Opportunity Boxed lunch sponsored by United Way of Southwestern PA <i>Remarks from Colonial Cupboard Service Project</i>
1:15 – 2:00 PM	Breakout Session 4

9:50 – 10:35 a.m. Breakout Session 1 - Select 1 of the following options:

Smarter Borrowing for Your Students: 10 Strategies to Implement During College Advising

Hall 1

Presenters: Dr. Kim McCurdy, PA Higher Education Assistance Agency
Laura Papcunik, PA Higher Education Assistance Agency
Tara Verrico, Geneva College

This session provides college advisors with 10 practical strategies and resources to implement as you counsel students transitioning from high school to college. Whether students will be attending a 2-year, 4-year, or business, trade, and tech school, there are tools and resources that can make their necessity to borrow more clear and less confusing. Representatives from PHEAA and the postsecondary financial aid office will share their collective knowledge and wisdom during this interactive presentation.

What Can I Do If I Can't Do the Four-Year Degree? Leveraging Workforce Development for the Adult Learner.

Hall 2

Presenter: Sue Diehl, Community College of Allegheny County

This workshop will address the critical challenges faced by adult students balancing adult responsibilities. The idea of pursuing a four-year degree while working full-time or raising a family or being self-supporting can seem daunting. By shifting the focus from a long-term academic duration to career efficiency, concrete solutions are possible. Strategic options, such as flexible scheduling, stackable credentials, and concentration on skill-building may be a solution to building tangible career outcomes. Attendees will leave with practical suggestions for adapting college services to the placement of priorities on flexibility and tangible career outcomes.

Lessons Learned: Navigating Alternative Paths to College

Hall 3

Presenters: Anika Jones, University of Pittsburgh
Rosie Hogan, University of Pittsburgh
Alec Barlock, University of Pittsburgh

The University Educational Outreach Center focuses on supporting students to and through college. Two of our Pathway Programs, Pittsburgh Admissions Collaboration and Resilient Scholars Network, engage with non-traditional students (i.e., experiences in the child welfare system, community college, gap year, alternate college degrees, etc.) seeking college degrees. As we support students navigating alternative paths to college, we have discovered barriers and sources of support through the post-secondary education process. Our workshop will focus on discussing barriers for nontraditional students, sources of support, and ways to empower students through the process.

9:50 – 10:35 a.m. Breakout Session 1 - Select 1 of the following options:

Equipping Families with Long-Term Savings Products

Hall 4

Presenters: Toni Corinealdi, Neighborhood Allies Fund My Future PGH
Ashley McLean, Neighborhood Allies
Sarah Dieleman Perry, Neighborhood Allies
Jesse Streeter, PA Treasury

Children with long-term savings accounts in their names are three times more likely to go to college and four times more likely to graduate. Fund My Future PGH, a program of Neighborhood Allies, provides incentives, assistance, and information to families to open long-term savings accounts that can be used after their children leave high school. Neighborhood Allies partners closely with PA Treasury to promote their products: PA 529 accounts, PA ABLE accounts (for children with disabilities), Keystone Scholars (for children born after 12/31/18), as well as Trump Accounts, which will be available to all children born between 1/1/25 and 12/31/28. Fund My Future PGH Academy is a financial education program that helps parents and students plan for life after high school and learn how to leverage money saved to support their next steps. This workshop will provide resources that parents can access to support future goals.

Applying to College in 2026 - Perspectives from College Admission Officers on an Evolving Application Process

Hall 5

Presenters: Justin Mohney, Carnegie Mellon University
Michael Newland, Duquesne University
Jamie Sansverie, University of Pittsburgh

The process of applying to colleges and universities is constantly evolving, and the pace of change has been especially brisk the last few years. This session will give an overview of changes that admission leaders in the Pittsburgh region are observing, including hot topics in the application process such as the evolving landscape around testing policies, comparing scholarship offers and timing of enrollment commitments, and shifts in students' perception of "value" in education. After our panelists share thoughts on these topics, we'll open the conversation for questions and conversation from the audience on changes they are observing in the process.

10:55 – 11:40 a.m. Breakout Session 2 - Select 1 of the following options:

AI at Work: Real Tools, Real Results for College Access Professionals

Hall 1

Presenter: Michael White, Slippery Rock University

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant innovation, it's a practical, everyday tool reshaping the work of counselors, admissions professionals, financial aid offices, faculty advisors, CBOs, and policy organizations. Yet many in our field still wonder: What can AI actually do for me right now? This high-energy, show-and-tell-style session answers that question with clarity and excitement. Rather than offering theory, this session delivers real-world AI workflows, live demonstrations, and immediately actionable tools that enhance student support, simplify complex tasks, and expand capacity across the entire college access pipeline. Attendees will learn the art of effective prompting — the single most important AI skill in 2025 — and see how strategic prompt design can transform everyday tasks in counseling, admissions, recruitment, communication, policy interpretation, financial aid outreach, and operational planning. The session includes live AI demonstrations, a hands-on prompt-building workshop, and a downloadable AI Playbook for College Access Professionals. By the end, participants will leave with a renewed understanding of how AI can support and not replace the human expertise at the heart of our work.

Beyond the Textbook: Lessons Learned from the Reality of Student Financial Literacy

Hall 2

Presenters: Joel Philistin, University of Pittsburgh
Janet McLaughlin, University of Pittsburgh

The University of Pittsburgh Financial Wellness Center has been operating for five years, launching during the 2020–2021 academic year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning, we quickly learned the importance of adapting both our programming and our content to meet the evolving and unique financial literacy needs of students. This roundtable session will highlight key lessons learned from the Center's operations and explore how these insights can inform just-in-time, relevant financial education for high school students. Participants will examine practical strategies to help students and families make informed choices about college and financial readiness, and discuss opportunities to strengthen support at the critical transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Supporting Forcibly Displaced Youth in Accessing Post-Secondary Education

Hall 3

Presenters: Dakota Rottino-Garilli Alliance for Refugee Youth Support & Education
Katie Mirt, Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh

In this session, education stakeholders can receive critical context on the state of post-secondary education access for refugee and immigrant youth and discuss best practices for supporting these students' unique needs.

10:55 – 11:40 a.m. Breakout Session 2 - Select 1 of the following options:

Expanding College Access through Inclusive Postsecondary Education Programs for Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Hall 4

Presenter: McKenna Killion, Westmoreland County Community College

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have historically faced systemic barriers to accessing higher education alongside their peers. These barriers contribute to persistently high unemployment rates and limited career opportunities for adults with IDD. In response, inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs have expanded across the county, largely due to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 which established a framework for colleges to offer tailored supports and campus inclusion for students with IDD. This session will highlight the development and impact of inclusive postsecondary education across Pennsylvania from the lens of the RISE program at Westmoreland County Community College. RISE is an inclusive program designed to provide students with IDD the opportunity to pursue a college credential in a career pathway of their choice. Through academic coaching, peer mentoring, and strong collaboration with existing campus resources, the program equips students with the skills, confidence, and support needed to succeed in college. Participants will gain an understanding of the landscape of IPSE programs in Pennsylvania and learn practical strategies for supporting college students with IDD. The session will offer insights into IPSE program design, campus supports for neurodiverse learners, and strategies for increasing inclusion within higher education.

College and Career Readiness Counseling in Schools

Hall 5

Presenters: Karen Rubican, Pennsylvania Department of Education
Dr. Jennifer Kirk, Upper St. Clair High School

This session will equip high school counselors with effective strategies to guide students toward college and career readiness. Participants will explore best practices aligned with Pennsylvania requirements, including graduation pathways, Chapter 339 planning, career portfolios, and MTSS. The session offers actionable tools to support diverse student needs, enhance your comprehensive school counseling program, and ensure both compliance and post-secondary success for each and every student.

11:45 – 12:30 p.m. Breakout Session 3 - Select 1 of the following options:

Making Sense of Early College Credit: A Practical Guide to AP, CHS, Dual Enrollment & More!

Hall 1

Presenter: Meredith Weber, Carlow University

Early college credit options—AP, College in High School (CHS), dual enrollment, and more—offer valuable opportunities but can be confusing for students and families. This session provides a clear, practical framework to explain these pathways and help students make informed choices. Participants will learn how credit is earned, how it impacts GPA, and how colleges categorize incoming credit (core, major, or elective). The session will also demonstrate tips on finding how a course applies toward degree requirements. Attendees will leave with key advising questions to ask students before they enroll and tips for supporting those entering college with advanced standing.

Foster-Care-to-College: Resources for Higher Education

Hall 2

Presenters: Abby Gabner, PA Higher Education Assistance Agency
Wendy Dunlap, PA Higher Education Assistance Agency

Representatives from PA Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) will present on higher education financial aid and other resources for youth with foster care experience who are interested in pursuing a post-secondary education. They will discuss the importance of advocacy and the promotion of self-advocacy as it relates to student success for this student population.

Student Success Through Career Readiness

Hall 3

Presenter: Diane Metz, Westmoreland County Community College

This session highlights cross-campus approaches for embedding the NACE Career Readiness Competencies into classes, student services, and co-curricular experiences. Integrating the Career Readiness Competencies can broaden opportunity and strengthen outcomes for students. Participants will explore strategies that support consistent, student-centered implementation that enhances skill development, confidence, and career preparation.

11:45 – 12:30 p.m. Breakout Session 3 - Select 1 of the following options:

Supporting Student Veterans: Benefits, Insights, and Best Practices

Hall 4

Presenters: Carrie Wilson, PA Gunsmith School
Cory Shay, PennWest University

Veterans bring unique strengths—and unique challenges—when transitioning from military service to higher education. This session equips high school counselors, college admissions and financial aid professionals, and community organizations with the tools to support veterans (and future veterans) effectively. Learn five key things veterans want you to know, explore strategies for building trust and collaboration, and gain a clear understanding of the education benefits available to veterans. Walk away with practical insights and actionable steps to help those who served succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Counselor/College Admissions Panel: Supporting Students on Both Sides of the Desk

Hall 5

Presenters: Karen Rubican, Pennsylvania Department of Education
Dr. Jennifer Kirk, Upper St. Clair High School

This session will bring together school counselors and college admissions professionals to discuss the ways in which all students are supported as they navigate postsecondary planning and attainment.

1:15 – 2:00 p.m. Breakout Session 4 - Select 1 of the following options:

Meeting Collegiate Needs Through Support Services and Programming

Hall 1

Presenters: Nina Schall, Westmoreland County Community College
Denise Giron, Westmoreland County Community College
Tara Gandy, Westmoreland County Community College

Discussion regarding frequent student needs and unexpected barriers, internal and external high related supports, community resources and programming.

“The Next Generation Will Save Us,” the Imperative of Entrepreneurship Education

Hall 2

Presenter: Emily Donato, BUILD.org

Pittsburgh’s future workforce is being reshaped by rapid advances in technology, automation, and AI—trends accelerating across the energy sector. Yet many youth, especially in under-resourced communities, lack access to STEM learning, digital literacy, and work-readiness experiences that prepare them for family-sustaining careers. BUILD helps students become the CEOs of their own lives by building Career Success, Entrepreneurial Mindsets, and Opportunity. Entrepreneurship education can be a great equalizer, with improved outcomes across racial and economic lines. Research shows that it results in youth actively engaging in learning, reduced school dropout, and maximized "real-life" application of 21st century skills. See how BUILD has supported tens of thousands of high school students to graduate on time and gain access to Social Emotional learning, digital skills and financial literacy, all while starting their own businesses as early as 9th grade.

Scholars Speak: What Parenting Students Want Colleges to Know

Hall 3

Presenter: Dr. Daren Ellerbee, Pittsburgh Scholar House

Moderated by Dr. Daren Ellerbee, this scholar-led panel amplifies the voices of parenting-scholars as they share what colleges need to know to better support their academic success. Through their lived experiences, panelists highlight the unique challenges they navigate and offer clear, actionable insights for creating environments where parenting-students can truly thrive.

CCAC is T.A.P.P.E.D. Into the Community

Hall 4

Presenter: Bilita McIntosh, Community College of Allegheny County

This session will equip post-secondary education institutions with tangible strategies on community engagement and collaborations. Providing a pathway to student success and the recruitment of prospective students.

Keynote Speaker: AJ Jefferson



AJ Jefferson is a CEO and keynote speaker who helps leaders lead well in uncertain, complex, or changing environments. She serves as President and CEO of the Homeless Children's Education Fund, where she has guided the organization through rapid growth while staying deeply grounded in mission and people.

Known for her warm presence and honest storytelling, AJ blends lived experience with practical leadership insight. Her sessions leave leaders with language, clarity, and tools they can apply immediately, not someday, but the very next day they return to their teams.

AJ speaks nationally for corporate ERGs, leadership teams, universities, and foundations. Her work has been featured on Good Morning America and The Kelly Clarkson Show, and she is recognized for leadership that centers courage, care, and clarity in real and meaningful ways.

Thank you to our sponsors, the Pittsburgh Promise and United Way of Southwestern PA, for providing refreshments to attendees allowing us to keep this program free to participants. We know the value of the program and appreciate everything you do for us!

Thank you to Robert Morris University and in particular, Stephanie Hendershot and Dr. Michelle Patrick, for supporting the Roundtable efforts and for always making your campus available for this event. We really appreciate you!

Finally, thank you to all the presenters who have volunteered their time and expertise to make the CSF a valuable professional development opportunity. And to all the attendees, thank you for continuing to attend and support our efforts to share ideas and ensure student success.

We value your feedback when planning our annual CSF! Please help us plan for our 2026 CSF by completing our event survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/G6XFLM6> or by scanning the QR code!



Amy Kotzev, President, WPACSR

the pittsburgh promise.org.

