



12th Annual College Success Forum

Tuesday, February 4, 2025
UPMC Events Center
Robert Morris University

AGENDA

8:30 – 9:00 AM	Registration/Networking <u>Refreshments sponsored by Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education (PCHE)</u>
9:00 – 9:05 AM	General Welcome/Housekeeping Amy Sawdey , President, Western PA College Success Roundtable; PHEAA
9:05 – 9:15 AM	Opening Remarks Dr. Michelle Patrick , President, Robert Morris University
9:15 – 9:45 AM	Keynote Speaker— Alyssa Dobson , Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships (Slippery Rock University)
9:50 – 10:35 AM	Breakout Session 1
10:35 – 10:50 AM	Break
10:50 – 11:35 AM	Breakout Session 2
11:40 -12:25 PM	Breakout Session 3
12:30 – 1:05 PM	Networking Lunch Opportunity <u>Boxed lunch sponsored by United Way of Southwestern PA</u> <i>Remarks from Colonial Cupboard Service Project</i>
1:10 – 1:55 PM	Breakout Session 4
1:55 – 2:00 PM	Closing Remarks

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

Fostering Belonging

Hall 1

Presenters: Dr. Keely Baronak, Carlow University
Sarah Zeffiro, Carlow University

In this session, participants will explore the intersection of high school and post secondary success with an individual's sense of belonging in educational spaces (including classrooms, schools and community based organizations). The research on how to foster belonging will be reviewed and practical strategies applicable to classroom and community spaces shared. Specific strategies for building equitable and supportive learning communities will be discussed. Presenters will share resources for continuing and expanding upon this work.

Investing in the Future at Every Age: Neighborhood Allies' Economic Opportunity Initiatives

Hall 2

Presenters: Sarah Dieleman Perry, Neighborhood Allies
Toni Corinealdi, Neighborhood Allies
Javier Janik, Neighborhood Allies
Ashley McLean, Neighborhood Allies

Not everyone has equal access to opportunities to build wealth, and huge gaps for women and people of color persist. The purpose of Neighborhood Allies' Economic Opportunity initiatives is to position families to access the resources and support they need to achieve long-term, sustained financial well-being and build generational wealth. Learn about three initiatives that utilize financial empowerment to open up new opportunities in banking and saving to families in Allegheny County.

Fund My Future PGH, Bank On Allegheny County, and the Allegheny County Financial Empowerment Center provide assistance, connections, reminders, and incentives to set and reach personal and family goals — including opening safe and affordable bank accounts, reducing debt, saving, and building credit. Learn how you can join Neighborhood Allies to help children, adults, and families in Allegheny County to realize their vision for college success and beyond.

Empowering Future-Ready Students: Navigating Pennsylvania's New Career Education, Work, and Personal Finance Standards

Hall 3

Presenter: Amy McShane, Allegheny Intermediate Unit

Pennsylvania's updated Career Education and Work Standards, along with the newly introduced Personal Finance Standards, are set to significantly shape the way students prepare for life beyond school. This session will provide an in-depth exploration of these standards, their impact on K-12 education, and practical ways educators can implement them to support career readiness and financial literacy in students.

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

Breaking Barriers and Unlocking Potential: Empowering Youth who have experienced foster care through the Pitt Horizon Scholars Program

Hall 4

Presenters: Micah Reed, University of Pittsburgh
Anika Jones, University of Pittsburgh

Youth who have experienced foster care often face some of the greatest obstacles to continuing their education. The University of Pittsburgh has worked to address these barriers through the Horizon Scholars Program, which provides support for students with experience in the child welfare system on their journey to and through college. The program offers mentorship, college exploration and academic support, resource navigation and more. By providing a stable support network, The Horizon Scholars Program aims to reduce barriers and improve educational outcomes for youth with experience in the child welfare system. In this session, we'll explore the key elements across the Pre-college and Pitt Horizon Scholars program including program components, building community partnerships, and opportunities for educators and institutions to provide support to this group of students on their journey to and through college.

College Admissions: Trends and an Evolving Application Process

Hall 5

Presenters: Justin Mohney, Carnegie Mellon University
Michael White, Slippery Rock University

The application process for colleges and universities is constantly changing, and that has been particularly true in recent years. This session will give an overview of trends in college applications from recent years and projections of future trends in application volume. Attendees will then have the opportunity to hear from our presenters on a number of hot topics in the application process including the evolving landscape around testing policies and perceptions of the use of artificial intelligence in the application process before engaging in an open dialogue addressing topics of interest to attendees.

10:50 – 11:35 a.m. Breakout Session 2 - Select 1 of the following options:

Federal Update - Higher Education

Hall 1

Presenter: William Lindsey, PHEAA

This federal update will provide an overview of the latest happenings in Washington specific to higher education with a focus on federal financial aid policy and how it has impacted students and institutions. We will highlight some of the recent changes to student loan repayment plans and will provide an update on overall forgiveness.

Outsiders On the Inside

Hall 2

Presenters: Paul Johnson, The Pittsburgh Promise
Angela Weaver, The Pittsburgh Promise

A panel-style discussion to highlight the benefit of having community partners and third-party organizations in the schools and how we can join forces to better support the students AND staff at these schools.

Our Path Forward: Exploring How CBOs Partner with Underrepresented Youth to Support their Post-Secondary Decision-Making

Hall 3

Presenters: Zaida Pearson, Youth Enrichment Services (YES)
Denise Jones, Youth Enrichment Services (YES)
Deanna Sinex, Youth Enrichment Services (YES)
Dennis Jones, Youth Enrichment Services (YES)

Navigating postsecondary educational opportunities is often a complex process that requires immense guidance and support in order to find, apply, and enroll in post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, students are tasked with finding and aligning the appropriate educational pursuit with their interests, where these decisions have serious implications for their futures. However, low-income students, particularly for youth of color, rarely completed these programs, leading to heavy debt and limited employment opportunities (Deming et al., 2012; Holland & DeLuca, 2016). However, community-based organizations have the potential to fill in the gaps within traditional education and support systems, where they have the capacity and flexibility to tailor individualized support to each student. Youth Enrichment Services (YES), a community-based nonprofit that provides youth with a wide range of programs to support positive development, is provided as one example of advocacy work that supports students during postsecondary education decision making. This workshop will create discussion around how YES and other CBOs can best counsel youth, and how these spaces can create informal mentorship relationships to serve as an intervention during post-secondary education selection.

10:50 – 11:35 a.m. Breakout Session 2 - Select 1 of the following options:

Getting Strategic with PA MASLOW Resources

Hall 4

Presenters: Lisa Balsamo, PA Department of Education
Michelle Simmons, Department of Education

This interactive session aims to discuss how PA MASLOW resources and toolkits can be utilized and adapted for various practitioners in Higher Ed, K-12, and CBOs who are directing collegiate basic needs work to assist learners. Representatives from the PA Department of Education will guide participants through activities to get you thinking about how to move your efforts to the next level.

College and Career Readiness Counseling in Schools

Hall 5

Presenters: Karen Rubican, PA Department of Education
Dr. Jennifer Kirk, Upper Saint Clair HS

This session will empower high school counselors with strategies to effectively guide students in achieving college and career readiness. Participants will explore best practices aligned with Pennsylvania requirements, including graduation pathways, Chapter 339 planning, and the integration of individual career plans along with utilization of the MTSS model to guide your comprehensive school counseling program. Gain actionable insights to support diverse student needs and ensure compliance while fostering postsecondary success.

11:40 – 12:25 p.m. Breakout Session 3 - Select 1 of the following options:

Reimagining Higher Education in Pittsburgh While Keeping our Promise: Access, Affordability, and Equity in the Changing Landscape

Hall 1

Presenters: Drucella Garcia, Carnegie Mellon University
Amy Yearwood, The Pittsburgh Promise
Carrie Woodard, Pittsburgh Public Schools
Alicia Oglesby, Winchester Thurston

The landscape of higher education is rapidly evolving, and leaders across the sectors are grappling with critical questions: Who can attend college? How can they afford it? And how can institutions better serve the diverse students enrolling today? As the national conversation shifts toward access and affordability, we must also navigate the shifting political climate and the significant changes in areas such as FAFSA & financial aid, application review processes post-SFFA decision, and recruitment strategies. These pressing issues are top priorities for educators, advocates, and policy makers alike. This session will provide a unique opportunity for participants to engage in an open discussion with four seasoned professionals, each with over a decade of experience in student recruitment, support services, advocacy, resource development, inclusive practices, and creating equitable educational experiences for prospective and current students. Together, they'll share insights from their work in the Pittsburgh region—highlighting the diverse challenges and opportunities both within the city of Pittsburgh, SW PA, and its surrounding communities. Representing a range of perspectives, the panelists bring expertise from a private high school, a community-based organization, a highly selective institution, and the broader Pittsburgh Public Schools system. This conversation will explore how educational leaders from these different sectors are working to serve students from a variety of backgrounds, including those from communities beyond the city of Pittsburgh, who often face distinct barriers to access and success in higher education. Join us to learn how we can collaborate across sectors to ensure that Pittsburgh's students—whether from the city or its neighboring regions—are supported in their journey to and through college.

College Readiness Re-Imagined: a Unique Approach to Preparing Adult Learners for Higher Education

Hall 2

Presenters: Dr. Sherlyn Harrison, Pittsburgh Scholar House
Natasha Tull, Pittsburgh Scholar House
Dr. Shallegra Moye, Brilliantly Blessed
Dr. Lisa Pickett, Pittsburgh Public Schools
PSH Scholar, Pittsburgh Scholar House

This session offers participants an overview of the Wayfinders Program and PSH's mission to remove barriers to degree completion for single parents and adult learners. Through an engaging panel discussion, PSH instructors will showcase how their thoughtfully designed college readiness course motivates and equips parenting students and adult learners to successfully enroll or re-enroll in higher education.

11:40 – 12:25 p.m. Breakout Session 3 - Select 1 of the following options:

Artificial intelligence for College Access in 2025 and Beyond

Hall 3

Presenter: Michael White, Slippery Rock University

Artificial intelligence (AI) holds the promise of significantly enhancing college access and success for all students. By prioritizing responsible and ethical AI development, we can leverage this technology to personalize learning, streamline admissions processes, and empower students to reach their full potential. Because let's face it, students most certainly use AI. Therefore, in this discussion, we will explore real-world examples of successful AI tools and discuss the policies needed to ensure their equitable and effective use.

Food Insecurity and Support in Higher Education

Hall 4

Presenters: Kristen Louttit, Pennsylvania Western University
Diane Hasbrouck, Pennsylvania Western University

PennWest University supports students by providing a free food pantry on each campus, but students also qualify for services that they may not be aware of. Food insecurity affects over 10% of families and individuals in our region with around 50% qualifying for SNAP benefits. This session will focus on the benefits of an on-campus food pantry program to address issues faced by students in higher education as well as review state and federal programs that students are able to participate in such as SNAP, TANF, and WIC.

School 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
Barry Duerr, University of Pittsburgh
Mike Bruce, Bethel Park High School
Justin Mohney, Carnegie Mellon University

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.

1:10 – 1:55 p.m. Breakout Session 4 - Select 1 of the following options:

How Sport Can Create Post-Secondary Success

Hall 1

Presenters: Anthony Russo, Open Field
Julie Bruening, Open Field

Open Field partners with the Community College of Allegheny County to manage & support their club soccer teams. We provide a varsity-like, collegiate sports experience on the field & in the classroom for our student-athletes. We take it one step further by supporting these students prepare for life after graduation whether that means immediately joining the workforce or transferring to a four-year institution. This year we formed our first-ever Women's team. Our proposed session would address the unique set of challenges we faced in order to achieve our goal. As well as insight as to how providing individual support to student-athletes and creating community can increase overall student engagement & academic experience.

My Smart Dreams

Hall 2

Presenters: Raheem Perry, Homewood Children's Village
Anton Reed, Homewood Children's Village

Sharing the My SMART Dreams app which is a portable postsecondary goal in your pocket.

2025-26 FAFSA Updates

Hall 3

Presenters: Wendy Dunlap, PHEAA
Julie Fontana, PHEAA

Join us to learn about the 2025-26 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and resources that you can use to promote FAFSA filing. We will provide an overview of the 2025-26 FAFSA, share feedback on how families and students are navigating the FAFSA, and provide you with tools and tips to increase awareness about the FAFSA.

From High School to Higher Ed: Equipping Counselors for Student Success

Hall 4

Presenters: Dr. Tasha Peacock, Thriving Through Transformation LLC
Dr. Ebonie Lamb, Thriving Through Transformation LLC

As a former college admissions director with eight years of experience at a top 100 research institution, I observed a disconnect between high school counselors and college admission representatives regarding admissions practices. As a former public high school teacher with twenty-one years of experience, I witnessed the uncertainty many students face when considering career paths and identifying the skills needed for life after high school. The goal of our session is to bridge gaps in awareness among counselors. This engaging one-hour workshop equips high school counselors and community-based organizations with actionable strategies and free resources to effectively guide students through the high school-to-college transition and career admission processes. Participants will receive a transformation guide template that can be used to support students interested in post-secondary opportunities. The guide will include a template for school selection, understanding financial aid, awareness of trade programs, and how to search for scholarships. The session will enhance the counselor's awareness of available resources to support all students and promote equitable practices for every learner.

Keynote Speaker: Alyssa Dobson



Alyssa Dobson is the Director of Financial Aid and Scholarships at Slippery Rock University. Slippery Rock is a part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education; a medium sized institution serving about 9,000 undergraduate and graduate students. She has worked in the field of higher education, financial aid specifically, for over 20 years. During this time, she has worked in the private and public sectors as well as career schools. She has experience advocating on Capitol Hill as well as with the negotiated rulemaking process. Alyssa is also currently on the Government Relations Committee for PASFAA (Pennsylvania Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators). She is also active within the Western Pennsylvania College Success Roundtable, and the “PA FAFSA Go” movement, where she and her colleagues work toward smoothing the transition between high school and college for this region’s most vulnerable populations. Through this latest transformation of the FAFSA form, she has come to realize the importance that the collective “we” have in this process, the bumpy road to higher education, and the profound impact we can have when we provide resources and access.

FAFSA Completion Workshop

In partnership with Robert Morris University and the United Way, the Western PA College Success Roundtable will be hosting a 2025-26 FAFSA Completion Workshop following the CSF. This event will be open to any student/family interested in completing the 25-26 FAFSA.

Robert Morris University
UPMC Events Center

February 4th
4:30 - 6:30 PM

45-minute appointments available
starting at 4:30 pm

Hot chocolate and cookies provided by United Way of Southwestern PA.

Thank you to our sponsors, Pittsburgh Council on Higher Education (PCHE), and United Way of Southwestern PA, for providing refreshments to attendees so we can keep the 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 CSH a valuable professional development opportunity. And to all the attendees, thank you for continuing to 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/6BTTP8L> or by scanning the QR code below!



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Sawdey', located below the QR code.

Amy Sawdey, President, WPACSR



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