

IERC News

IERC Transitions

After five years at the helm of the IERC, Janet Holt has announced her retirement from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE). Under Holt's leadership, the IERC has successfully garnered numerous research grants and produced many impactful studies aimed at supporting research-informed education policy. Holt has been fortunate to work with a top-notch research staff at the IERC who have tremendous expertise in both research methods and education policy. As Executive Director, Holt also served as coordinator for the Illinois P-20 Council, the state's primary education advisory body. Holt plans to continue her scholarship in education research and policy as a Professor Emeritus of Educational Leadership at SIUE.

Holt will be passing the leadership of the IERC to Bradford White, IERC Associate Director, as he takes on the Interim Director role beginning June 1.

Other retirements and staff changes at the IERC include Jackie Twitty, IERC Office Manager, who retired April 30 and Jennifer Barnhart, IERC Research Associate, who will retire June 30. We also welcome Beverly Ahrens to the IERC as an Administrative Assistant.

Call for Proposals – Focus on Illinois Education Research Symposium

The IERC is now accepting proposals for posters and presentations for the IERC's *15th Annual Focus on Illinois Education Research Symposium* which will take place at the Northern Illinois University Conference Center in Naperville on November 9–10. The IERC is pleased to hold this year's Symposium in coordination with the Illinois Association of Institutional Research's annual conference. Proposals will be accepted at ierc@siue.edu until August 1. More information is available online [here](#).

IERC Releases Study on How Some Institutions Are Supporting More Underrepresented Students to Graduation with Less Student Debt



The latest IERC study, **Degrees with Less Debt: Effective Higher Education Strategies for Underrepresented Student Populations** led by Executive Director Janet Holt and commissioned by **St. Louis Graduates** with funding from the Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA), was released at *Stand With Students: Leveraging Leadership to Support Postsecondary Success*, an event hosted by St.

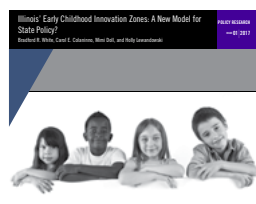
Louis Graduates and the St. Louis Regional Chamber.

The study explores the practices of five postsecondary institutions, which, according to the report, are excelling in serving underrepresented students. Through interviews with both administrators and students, the study identifies promising strategies and best practices from featured institutions for supporting students in attaining completion while minimizing their debt burden.

The report has received nationwide attention, having been spotlighted on the TRIO blog, Pell Institute blog, American Association of State Colleges and Universities digest, and by the Lumina Foundation.

In connection with the report, Janet Holt will moderate a panel comprised of administrators and staff from the five featured institutions at this year's National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) conference in St. Louis in October. Institutional representatives will share their strategies for supporting graduation with less debt for underrepresented students from the St. Louis region.

Early Childhood Innovation Zones Report Release: Increasing Enrollment and Strengthening Quality in High-Need Communities



A **recent IERC study**, led by Associate Director, Bradford White, outlines promising practices for strengthening early childhood from an evaluation of Illinois Action for Children's Innovation Zones pilot. In the report, we share insights and lessons uncovered in our research on creative approaches to increasing the number of Illinois' most vulnerable children enrolled in high quality early learning programs. Funded through

the state's Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge award, the Innovation Zones initiative supported capacity building efforts in 11 underserved Illinois communities.

The initiative targeted improvement strategies for two primary outcome measures: (1) enrolling and serving more children (birth to kindergarten) from priority populations in early learning programs; and (2) increasing the number of early learning programs participating in the state's quality rating and improvement system. Over the duration of the grant, zones obtained modest gains in enrollment overall and quality ratings increased across all zones and within each zone. The Innovation Zones initiative offers new possibilities for delivering statewide early learning and development opportunities by allowing communities to develop tailored strategies and promoting creative solutions to common challenges in the early childhood system.

Sheretta Butler-Barnes Delivers Talk on Math Achievement of African American Girls at SIUE

Prior to the March Board meeting, the IERC and the SIUE STEM Center co-hosted Dr. Sheretta Butler-Barnes at SIUE. Butler-Barnes, an Assistant Professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, spoke about her research, which takes an intersectional approach to studying math achievement of African American girls. Her insightful talk was well received, walking the audience through an exploration of her research on how Black youths' cultural identity and their ecological risks and resources impact achievement and psychological well-being outcomes.



Recent IERC Presentations

We have been busy disseminating the findings of IERC studies this spring. These include

Holt, J. K.,¹ & Anderson, D. M. (2017, April). *Family education versus family finances in predicting college outcomes*. Roundtable presentation at the American Education Research Association, San Antonio, TX.

White, B. R. (2017, April). *Evaluation of principal preparation program reform in Illinois*. Roundtable presentation at the American Education Research Association, San Antonio, TX.

¹ Presenting author bolded

White, B. R., Klostermann, B. K., Baron, D., Holt, J. K., & Duffy, D. Q. (2017, April). *Innovative pathways to degrees and capacity-building for Illinois' early childhood workforce*. Presentation to the Gateways to Opportunity, Higher Education Forum, Bloomington, IL.

Anderson, D. M., & **Holt, J. K.** (2017, March). *Variation in the impact of high school environment on college applications*. Paper presentation at the annual meeting of the Association of Education Finance and Policy, Washington DC.

Anderson, D. M., & Holt, J. K. (2017, March). *High school students' knowledge of parental income and implications for planning how to finance college*. Paper presentation at the annual meeting of the Association of Education Finance and Policy, Washington DC.

Holt, J. K. (2017, February). *Degrees with less debt: Effective higher education strategies for underrepresented student populations*. St. Louis Graduates Professional Development Institute, St. Louis, MO.

Guest Feature

Our Executive Director Janet Holt will soon be retiring from the IERC. As she prepares for her transition, we are pleased to share the following interview with her as this issue's guest feature. Read on to learn more about her reflections on her proudest achievements, what remains to be done, and her advice to her successor for steering the IERC into its next chapter.



Q: Tell us more about your background and how you came to the IERC.

A: I was a Professor and Program Coordinator of Education Research and Evaluation at NIU before coming to SIUE and the IERC. I earned my PhD in Educational Psychology in Statistics and Measurement from SIUC in 1994 and came to NIU as an assistant professor that fall.

I taught graduate statistics and research classes and advised many talented students for 18 years at NIU. My substantive areas of focus have included persistence in STEM fields among women and minority populations, adult literacy, and early language development. I have always had a strong interest in education policy and was excited to have the opportunity to combine my interests in both research and education policy at the IERC.

Q: What achievements or projects are you most proud of during your leadership at the IERC?

A: My first year at the IERC, we underwent a rebranding campaign and redesigned our website. We have developed a social media presence (Thanks to Amber Kirchhoff!), started the IERC Newsletter, and have grown the Symposium's visibility and attendance, attracting top-notch keynotes and presenters.

Our research staff has conducted many quality studies, which have influenced Illinois education policy, including our principal preparation (I-PREP) study with the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research. One of my favorite research projects was the recently released **Degrees with Less Debt** study, commissioned by St. Louis Graduates. I enjoyed using both quantitative and qualitative methods and am proud to work on research aimed at helping colleges and universities successfully support their underrepresented students to graduation.

Q: In your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges and priority issues facing education in Illinois, the work still needing to be tackled?

A: This is such a challenging time for education in Illinois. With the most **inequitable school funding formula** in the nation, I hope state policymakers can reach agreement on a new, more equitable funding formula soon. We have great educators in this state but they can only do so much without adequate resources.

Also, Illinois' higher education institutions are really suffering right now and our students from low-income families are bearing much of the burden without state funding for the Illinois financial aid grant program, the Monetary Award Program (MAP). Many universities have covered the cost of **MAP** for students during the budget impasse. However, some universities are very strapped and may no longer be able to do so, leaving the burden with students who, in many cases, do not have the resources to go to college without MAP awards. It is a very dire situation that needs to be addressed.

I am also concerned about the decreased enrollments at Illinois institutions and the loss of faculty talent to other states since the budget impasse began. I expect this will have a negative impact on our state's economic growth and competitiveness in the long run.

On a positive note, Illinois is leading the nation in principal preparation reform, with all of our higher education institutions preparing principals under more relevant and rigorous standards. Also, early childhood educator preparation is strong in this state. The IERC has produced a series of reports on both of these topics (**IERC 2015-2 & 2016-3**) (**2015-3 & 2016-2**) and co-published a

monograph with the Illinois Board of Higher Education on some of the reforms in early childhood educator preparation. We will be releasing a policy report in June on the postsecondary pathways for early childhood educators in Illinois.

Q: What do you see as the role of IERC moving forward and what is your advice for your successor?

A: The IERC has great relationships with state agencies, the P-20 Council, and other state education advisory groups. These partnerships allow the IERC to play an important role in supporting and strengthening education policy in Illinois by providing solid research on critical issues to inform the direction of these entities.

As to advice, there are many education policy groups in Illinois advocating for a variety of issues. The strength of the IERC has always been its independence and objectivity. Maintaining separation between research and advocacy is key for the IERC and helps to elevate the Council as a credible and reliable source.

Q: What's a fun fact about you?

A: My background before education was in biology and biochemistry. My undergraduate degree was in Zoology. I've worked on research in many diverse and interesting areas, including cellular research on plant pathogens, eye research, fish culture, DNA sequencing, and microbiology, prior to entering education.

I love to bird watch and bike, although I have found that the two don't go together well! I plan to do more of both in my retirement.

I have had the pleasure of working with an excellent group of researchers at the IERC, including Brad White, Brenda Klostermann, Eric Lichtenberger, and several faculty, students, and outside researchers. The IERC support staff is very accomplished as well, including Jennifer Barnhart, Jackie Twitty (retired), and our media guru, Amber Kirchhoff. I cannot leave SIUE without acknowledging my boss, Associate Provost Jerry Weinberg, who I have really enjoyed working with. I also want to acknowledge the support of the IERC advisory board during my tenure. They have been wonderful to work with and have provided sage and helpful advice along the way. It's been a delight working with all of you!

Feature Topic

Exploring MAP: A Deep Dive into Illinois' Signature Need-Based Student Grant Program

*We are pleased to share a guest piece from our collaborator Drew M. Anderson, Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. In March, Drew co-presented two papers with the IERC at the 42nd annual Association for Education Finance and Policy on **FAFSA Filing and College Selection** and **Student Knowledge of Family Finances During FAFSA Filing and College Financial Planning** respectively. We thank Drew for his contribution, tying together findings from these studies and providing an overview of key issues in the area of financial aid and college affordability.*



The cost of college is a barrier to college enrollment and completion for many students. This is the motivation for Illinois' investment in need-based financial aid, in the form of the Monetary Award Program (MAP). To date there has not been a causal evaluation of the MAP's impact on increasing college attainment in the state. Researchers at the IERC and at the Wisconsin HOPE Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have teamed up with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) to study MAP and other issues surrounding how today's students pay for college.

The MAP is unique compared to other grants based on financial need. Compared to some other state financial aid programs, MAP provides larger awards, and serves a larger part of the income distribution. A fair share (~13%) of MAP recipients do not qualify for the federal Pell Grant.

Like some other state financial aid programs, the MAP is inadequately funded (which was true even before the current budget standoff in Illinois). MAP is allocated first-come first-served based on when students file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a necessary step in applying for MAP. Many students file too late to receive an award.

The budget shortfall creates an opportunity to study the effects of the grant program. We will compare students who apply too late to students who are otherwise similar, but who applied early enough to receive a MAP award. If students who receive a MAP award are more successful, and we have adequately controlled for other differences between the students at baseline, then we can attribute their improved outcomes to the effects of the MAP in making college

more affordable. This research is in progress as we collect additional data on student enrollment and completion.

In the meantime, we have pursued studies of FAFSA filing behavior. First, we explored the implications of the first-come first-served policy currently in place. We pooled multiple years of first-time financial aid applicants over school years 2007-08 to 2014-15 and compared their characteristics depending on when they filed the FAFSA. During this time span, students could file any time from the January before the school year through the end of the school year in the following June.

We guessed that students with less “college knowledge” would tend to apply later, losing out on MAP awards. In fact, fully half of the very earliest MAP-eligible applicants were first-generation college students (without a parent who had earned a college degree). First-generation college students predominated even more among later applicants, but not by much. We did find large disparities in timing of FAFSA filing across types of colleges. Community college applicants tended to file later, while private four-year college applicants tended to file earlier, with public university students in between. Since they drew funds from the same budget, community college students were at a disadvantage if they acted later, for example deciding to attend college starting in the second semester of a school year.

In a separate study, we examined the financial knowledge of high school juniors who later applied for financial aid to pay for college. The most important determinant of financial aid eligibility is parental income. Based on research showing low levels of financial literacy among young people, and our own experience as high schoolers, we guessed that many high school students would not be able to accurately state their parents’ incomes. We found that students accurately stated parental income 24% of the time, within \$15,000. To our surprise, the majority of students were within \$30,000 of the correct income. When they erred, students were much more likely to overreport parental income. This may have led them to underestimate the aid they would qualify for as they planned for college. Look for upcoming IERC reports on these studies.

Over the years, MAP policy has shifted to better meet the needs of the state, for example extending prorated benefits to students attending less than half-time. It is important to discuss how different allocations of the MAP budget affect college enrollment and completion, and for whom. It is also important to know how well students understand the process of financing college. We appreciate that ISAC has invited researchers to the table for this discussion.

Upcoming

Upcoming Publications & Presentations

- May 2017 (expected release). Anderson, D. M., & Holt, J. K. *Research brief: Do high school students know their parents' income?*
- June 2017 (expected release). Bernoteit, S. A., Holt, J. K., & Kirchhoff, A. *Advancing the early childhood education workforce: A model college and career pathway.*
- June 2. Bradford White to represent on two recent IERC early childhood studies (**IERC 2016-3** & **IERC 2017-1**) at the City of Chicago Mayor's Office's Early Learning Research Symposium
- June 11–14. Stephanie Bernoteit of the Illinois Board of Higher Education to deliver a poster presentation on early childhood educator preparation program redesign (**IERC 2015-2** and **IERC 2016-3**), at the National Association for Education of Young Children's Professional Learning Institute in San Francisco
- June 19. Bradford White to present Illinois' **Early Childhood Innovation Zones: A New Model for State Policy?** to the Illinois Early Learning Council in Chicago

Upcoming Events

- Date: June 8
Event: **Governor's Cabinet on Children and Youth**
Location: Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, Chicago
- Date: June 12
Event: **Illinois P-20 Council** Meeting
Location: TBA
- Date: June 19
Event: **Illinois Early Learning Council**
Location: Roosevelt University, Chicago
- Date: July 20
Event: **College Changes Everything Conference**
Location: Tinley Park

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Campus Box 1064
Edwardsville, IL 62026-1064
<http://ierc.education>

Toll Free Number: 866-799-4372
Main Telephone: 618-650-2840
Fax Number: 618-650-2425
Email: ierc@siue.edu



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