

First Star Academy at Illinois State completes inaugural year

Deneca Winfrey Avant September 15, 2017



First Star Academy at Illinois State successfully completed its inaugural year on the campus of Illinois State University. First Star at Illinois State University (<https://adoptionresearch.illinoisstate.edu/projects/first-star-academy/>) is a college preparatory program for high school aged youth who receive foster care services. The program is administered through the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies (<https://adoptionresearch.illinoisstate.edu/>) and led by Social Work faculty Deneca Avant, Ph.D., and Doris M. Houston, Ph.D. First Star is funded by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and a private donor.

First Star Academies Inc. (<https://www.firststar.org/>) was established as a national model in 1999 to address the unique needs of youth in foster care through college preparation classes, leadership development, life skills workshops, and enrichment activities. While the benefits of a college degree are undeniable in terms of increased economic opportunity and career advancement, youth in foster care may lack sufficient academic preparedness and consistent family guidance to achieve their goals.

“Before First Star I didn’t want to go to school, but now I want to go to college.”—one First Star scholar

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During June 2017, First Star Scholars at Illinois State University participated in summer Math, English, Social Science Research, and Theatrical Expression classes. They also completed college prep workshops delivered by University College (<http://universitycollege.illinoisstate.edu/>) staff, lifestyle practices led by community partners, practiced cooking with Family and Consumer Sciences (<https://fcs.illinoisstate.edu/>) faculty, volunteered at the Center for Hope Food Pantry (<http://cfhoutreachprograms.org/cfh/cfh-food-pantry-network/>) and the Humane Society of Central Illinois (<http://www.hscipets.org/>), and hung out with Redbird athletes to learn healthy living. Scholars were also provided with a safe and supportive space to talk about their feelings with the help of School of Social Work (<https://socialwork.illinoisstate.edu/>) faculty, M.S.W. interns, and Student Counseling Services (<http://counseling.illinoisstate.edu/>) staff, Dakesa Pina, Ph.D., and Jillian Richardson, Psy.D.

In addition to the academic and life skills supports, students were exposed to a supportive network of college-bound peers, dedicated staff, and instructors whom they relied upon for emotional support and encouragement. “First Star means the world to me because I finally got the family that I was never able to have,” one First Star Scholar said. Another First Star Scholar agreed: “They treated me like someone who is important.”

Central figures to the program’s success included First Star Program Coordinator Jamillah Gilbert (Illinois State University Special Education (<https://education.illinoisstate.edu/about/departments/sed/>)) and Assistant Coordinator LaShawnda Kilgore who cared for the day-to-day needs of the scholars while supervising a staff of part-time Illinois State University College Coaches.

Although the summer immersion program ended June 30, students will continue with the program this fall and spring as they take part in monthly Saturday academies, academic mentoring, and life-skills programming.

“First Star means a better opportunity for me to achieve my goals in and out of college,” a 10th grade First Star Scholar said. “First Star means hope for the children in care to be able to become something other than a statistic and learn from the setbacks.”

Once admitted to the program, First Star Scholars participate in year-round activities throughout their high school tenure and they receive supports until they transition into college. First Star Academy at Illinois State will soon begin recruitment for the 2017–2018 First Star cohort.

To receive information about the program or to request an application, contact Deneca Winfrey Avant (<mailto:dwinfre@ilstu.edu>), Ph.D., director of First Star Academy at Illinois State, or Doris M. Houston (<mailto:dmhous2@IllinoisState.edu>).