Fostering College-Ready Financial Skills in the Northern Illinois Region

Introduction
This paper summarizes basic findings gathered by a Northern Illinois P20 Network survey of high school districts and community colleges who reported on current financial education practices. The network exists to improve college and career success for students through regional collaboration. The financial education survey was completed by the Student Support Services workgroup, which is focused on easing transitions and increasing student success. This report touches two of the workgroup’s objectives: (a) assembling a comprehensive menu of financial literacy resources for P20 students and families; and (b) building a comprehensive student support system that includes, among other services, financial literacy and financial aid advising.

Overview of Findings
The survey instrument was an initial effort to gather information about how financial education, vis-à-vis college readiness and success, is distributed across the educational system. Findings from individual surveys of high school districts and regional community colleges show that respondents often assume that the task of addressing financial literacy for higher education falls to the financial aid system, i.e., financial aid offices at colleges and universities coupled with College Night resources/services made available through the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC). Survey responses also seem to suggest that state-mandated high school consumer economics courses ought to be counted on to adequately prepare adolescents for the future. Beyond these two points on the educational continuum, from Elementary/Middle School to Higher Education, there are significant gaps.

A number of good practices (e.g., packaged programs) and partnerships (e.g., with banks) are in place, but they are not widespread or connected across the region nor are learning events well or enthusiastically attended by audiences most needing support. Oftentimes those who do attend are already on board, much like guardians who attend parent-teacher conferences. Further, most methods of assessment focus on counting the number of participants; little data exists to adequately measure short-term outcomes and long-term impact. Some good work is taking place in college orientation classes, but sophisticated financial literacy with its attendant skills is not a just-in-time learning task.

Commentary
When people understand a language — any language — they can go forward to converse, to read, and to gather new knowledge. It’s the same with the language of money and personal decision-making. Unfortunately, too many people have little more than a basic understanding of how money works or can work on their behalf. Additionally, the meaning of money varies according to economic, social, and cultural factors.

Financial aid offices are not designed or prepared to provide “catch up” financial literacy education. Most families and individuals need to prepare financially for higher education long before taking consumer economics in high school or attending a FAFSA completion workshop. Financial education is rarely a public topic; rather, it is assumed to be a private family matter. Many people come to these topics with deeply ingrained values and strong feelings that may impede learning new information or skills shown to expand the range of options available to themselves and their families.

Over the past few years a great deal of thought has been given to “social capital,” which describes resources that people and communities possess as a consequence of boundary spanning relationships.
and networks. Proponents of social capital theory argue that one’s chances of living a sustainable or prosperous life are strengthened by what and who you know. To create a financial learning region, we could collaborate to develop an intentional system of teaching and learning that brings existing knowledge (the identified resources) off the shelf at multiple points to support the learning continuum. This approach includes methods that help all populations build social capital regardless of their level of social or cultural assimilation.

**Recommendations**

We are building a comprehensive map of financial literacy resources and now need to explore how to foster networked financial education strategies that prepare people much earlier and at multiple stages, to finance higher education and to prepare for sustainable financial success. It is time to create practical support systems that assist students and families in understanding, locating, and taking advantage of available resources. Too often students simply do not take advantage of services and resources that may seem practical or obvious to others.

A key pedagogical goal should be to produce knowledge and skills that enable people and families to pursue prosperity in the United States in ways aligned with their personal and familial values. Such pedagogy should include methods that assist marginalized populations and all others in building social capital, regardless of their level of cultural assimilation.

In sum, the key question at this point is how to build a regionally networked system of education that integrates learning objectives and measureable outcomes within existing curricula to help people utilize our identified financial literacy resources?