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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Greater Oak Brook Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Partnership Launch STEM Bridge Partnership Program**

*Near-Peer mentoring program matches young business leaders with diverse students pursuing STEM careers*

**Oak Brook – April 5, 2017** – While seven of the top 10 fastest-growing occupations in the state are projected to be STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) or STEM-related occupations, according to the Illinois Science and Technology Coalition, a steady stream of Illinois graduates still head to the West Coast and other tech hubs each year, taking key skills with them. Compounding this lack of STEM talent are the lack of career-readiness skills that new graduates possess to be successful in the workplace.

In alignment with its mission to attract and retain a talented workforce, and in appreciation for the challenges surrounding school systems face, the Greater Oak Brook Economic Development Partnership has developed a unique “near-peer” mentoring program, matching young business professionals from the Greater Oak Brook Chamber of Commerce with students interested in pursuing in-demand STEM careers. In its initial launch, young leaders from Ace Hardware, GEA Architects, Terracon Construction, SWC Technology, and Northwestern Mutual are working together with 40 students from the culturally and economically diverse Willowbrook High School on real-life work simulations over an eight-week period.



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The development of this innovative, corporate focused program has been guided by its Steering Committee, chaired by Susan Lindquist, Chief Talent Officer of BCS Financial, and Mary Biniewicz, STEM Coordinator of DuPage Regional Office of Education, and is supported by the Chamber's staff and higher education partners.

"While there are alternate mentoring programs, the STEM Bridge Partnership program is truly unique in taking the vantage point of the employer by focusing on career-readiness skills, a perspective our high school partners tell us students rarely see," explained Valentina Tomov, CEO of the Greater Oak Brook Economic Development Partnership. "Working within the broad cultural and economic diversity of Willowbrook High School and championed by its principal Dan Krause, we are seeking to inspire young students to be prepared to pursue the emerging STEM careers of tomorrow."

The Architecture/Engineering program, led by young professionals Rich Blair from GEA Architects, Ltd. and Sean Toolan from Terracon Construction, challenges students to design the layout and develop the construction schedule for a new Yolk Restaurant, an actual project on which Blair and Toolan are currently collaborating. The Math in Marketing program, led by Ace's Shannon Kelly, simulates an Ace Hardware category review, a process of analyzing a product's performance and profitability. These students are conducting product testing, analyzing marketing data and building out actual plan-o-gram displays at Ace's warehouse headquarters.

The students are continuously applying essential skills including innovation, research, planning, evaluation, communication, and collaboration, under the inspirational guidance of their young mentors. "Our "new-peer" mentors have continuously shared their personal stories of how their early successes or sometimes failures in the workplace have been so dependent on non-technical skills. The narrow age gap between the mentors and the high schoolers makes them more relatable, providing that bridge to greater impact in their lessons", shared Tamryn Hennessy, Greater Oak Brook Chamber of Commerce Program Director.



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"Through partnering with the Greater Oak Brook Chamber of Commerce our students have gained valuable real-world experiences that will guide them on their journey to be college and career ready," shared Willowbrook High School principal Dan Krause.

The STEM Bridge Program will conclude May 16<sup>th</sup> with a culmination ceremony at Willowbrook High School, where the students will briefly share their projects with the Steering Committee and celebrate their accomplishments.

# # #

*The Greater Oak Brook Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Partnership (EDP) is a 501c3 charitable organization that works closely with its very engaged and dynamic corporate community to strengthen the area's economy and attract and retain a talented workforce. A 29-member board of directors that reflects a cross section of local companies governs the EDP, including senior professionals from Fortune 500 and 1000 companies, such as Ace Hardware Corporation and Hub Group, to mid to small-size employers representing the community's largest and growing segments: technology, investment and banking, hospitality and retail, transportation, and commercial real estate.*

*The EDP also serves as a coordinating group for our local employers, educators, and government stakeholders to develop and lead effective initiatives that will help prepare our local elementary, middle and high school students for the rewarding careers that will be available to them in the future. Additionally, the EDP coordinates solutions to address our community's future workforce-related transportation and infrastructure needs.*