

Keynote Speaker



**Kristen Broady,
Ph.D.**

**The Federal Reserve Bank
of Chicago**

Senior Economist and Economic
Advisor and Director of the Economic
Mobility Project



Dr. Kristen Broady is a senior economist, economic advisor, and director of the Economic Mobility Project at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. She is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where prior to joining the Chicago Fed, she served as a fellow, performing research and analysis on areas including the impact of automation on the labor market, the racial wealth gap, returns to higher education investment, and the disparate economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She is an adjunct professor of economics at Spelman College and has served on the faculties of higher education institutions including the University of Chicago, Dillard University, and Howard University, and as a visiting faculty member at Jiangsu Normal University in Xuzhou, China. She served as a consultant for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; a senior research fellow for the Center for Global Policy Solutions; a consultant for the City of East Point, Georgia; and as an HBCU consultant for season two of The Quad on Black Entertainment Television (BET). Broady earned a B.A. in criminal justice at Alcorn State University and an M.B.A. and Ph.D. in business administration with a major in economics at Jackson State University.

“Automation & AI Insights” Moderator



Cindy Tomei, CAE

**Sustainable Aviation
Fuels Institute
(SAFII)**

President



Cindy Tomei has been an Association Executive for over 20 years and obtained the Certified Association Executive (CAE) credential in 2016. While serving as an association president, the organization doubled its revenue, program offerings and sponsorship dollars. She has lead initiatives to increase membership and engagement, resulting in substantial increases in retention. Her greatest successes have come from building a vast network of industry professionals and connecting them to necessary resources and valuable connections.

In her role as SAFII President, she oversees its day-to-day operations, acquires members and sponsors, and secures its program offerings. She also promotes SAFII's unique expertise in providing hands-on training on the ASTM testing methods used to ensure SAF quality throughout the supply chain.

In her spare time, she gives back to her community by serving on non-profit boards, follows the NFL, and enjoys time with family.

“Automation & AI Insights” Panelist



**David Boulay,
Ph.D.**

**Illinois Manufacturing
Excellence Center
(IMEC)**

President



My leadership has developed from diverse settings that extend from a family-owned business, to manufacturing, universities and non-profits. These various experiences help guide our public-private partnership's strategic direction to serve as a catalyst for small and mid-sized company competitiveness.

I grew up in a family-owned business where I learned first-hand about the trial, challenges, and pride that I see in the owners and leaders of companies we work with today. I recognize their situations, understand their challenges and have the tools and knowledge to help accomplish their goals. I have also had the good fortune to work in various manufacturing roles from food plant sanitation to maintenance supervision to production, plant manager and business unit manager in companies such as Frito-Lay and Pillsbury.

Through these experiences, I learned how company success is reliant on the skills and talents of its' workforce. This has driven my passion in human resource development. My Ph.D. included a primary focus on high performance work practices in small and mid-sized companies and career pathways for workers.

I bring a diverse blend of expertise in performance management, small business development, and organizational growth strategies to IMEC. I have helped create and implement several initiatives to increase the flow of state and federal funding to manufacturers for projects, update worker skills, and help smaller manufacturers adopt new technology and business practices to improve energy efficiency.

“Automation & AI Insights” Panelist



Randy Prince

**Illinois
Manufacturers'
Association (IMA)**

Sr. Business Development
Manager



Randy Prince brings more than 30 years of experience in association management and manufacturing to his position of Senior Business Development Manager. He has solid experience in helping manufacturers build their brand and in taking their products to market. He created one of the first electric co-ops for commercial businesses in the state. Randy is based out of the Springfield office. Randy's enthusiasm for manufacturing is contagious and evident in the strong relationships he's built with industry leaders throughout the state. His work responsibilities include working with Illinois Manufacturers to solve some of their most challenging issues.

“Automation & AI Insights” Panelist



Cohen Barnes

SundogIT

Owner/CEO



Serving others is in Cohen Barnes' DNA. The owner and CEO of SundogIT, Cohen's ultimate mission is to make a difference in people's lives. Running the only veteran-lead technology firm in Northern Illinois with over 30 years' experience, he is extraordinarily passionate about providing technology that organizations in his community can thrive on to maximize their mission and make the largest impact they can.

An accomplished leader in managed IT services Microsoft cloud computing and cyber security, Cohen has helped hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses in Northern Illinois create a bigger impact by helping them maximize their company goals through optimizing their efficiency across all technical platforms.

While in college after leaving the Army, Cohen discovered his love of technology. He landed a dream job at the high-end firm Micro Solutions, where he provided tech support for companies such as NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and excelled at helping engineers at his firm find flaws in their next-generation technology. Seeing the potential in providing Internet access in the mid-1990s, he left his dream job to help establish the first commercial Internet service provider (ISP) in DeKalb County. Sundog was also the first broadband provider, the first fiber optic provider, the first technology company and the first to offer Microsoft 365 in DeKalb. Cohen grew SundogIT (formerly TBC) from a company operating out of a basement to a team of 20+ employees in three locations that offers managed IT services to assist clients in getting the best use out of their technology. He's built a vibrant culture of givers, with over half of his employees dedicating time to charitable organizations in the community outside of work.

“How to Fund Growth” Moderator



**Christine Flynn,
MPA, MSW**

**Workforce Policy Lab
at NIU**

Research Associate & Public
Sector Consultant



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Center for Governmental Studies
Outreach, Engagement, and Regional Development

**WORKFORCE
POLICY LAB**

Christine Flynn, MSW, MPA, is a Public Sector Consultant at Northern Illinois University’s Workforce Policy Lab, where she leads high-impact initiatives shaping workforce and economic development policy. A seasoned public sector leader with over a decade of experience, she has a proven record of advancing equitable policy solutions through advocacy, nonprofit leadership, resource development, and organizational strategy. At the Workforce Policy Lab, Christine has been instrumental in the design and implementation of flagship programs for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, including major statewide efforts under the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act and the Illinois Works Jobs Act—initiatives recognized as models for equitable workforce development nationally.

Christine holds a Master of Social Work in Leadership and Development from Loyola University Chicago and a Master of Public Administration from the University of Illinois Springfield.

“How to Fund Growth” Panelist



Renee Wott, MPA

Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO)

Senior Northeast Regional
Manager



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
JB Pritzker, Governor

Renee Wott serves as the Senior Northeast Regional Economic Development Manager at the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO), where she leads initiatives to foster economic growth and business development across the region. With a strong background in economic development, Renee collaborates with local governments, businesses, and community organizations to implement strategies that enhance regional competitiveness and quality of life.

Prior to her current role, Renee held various positions in the public and private sectors, gaining extensive experience in project management, community engagement, and grants management. Renee holds a Master of Public Administration in Bowling Green State University and is committed to continuous professional development. She is passionate about leveraging her expertise to support inclusive economic growth and is dedicated to making a positive impact in the communities she serves. She lives in Chinatown, Chicago with her wife and two cats.

“How to Fund Growth” Panelist



**Elisabeth
Williams**

SomerCor

Senior Vice President



Elisabeth “Lis” Williams is an SBA 504 loan program veteran. Prior to joining SomerCor in 2020, Williams co-founded and served as Vice President of Wessex 504 Corporation (an Illinois CDC) for eight years, growing the CDC’s 504 portfolio to more than \$110 million. Her background as an entrepreneur and deep understanding of the SBA 504 loan program make her an outstanding loan officer and resource.

Lis received her B.A. in Environmental Design from Miami University and her M.B.A. from the University of Chicago.

“How to Fund Growth” Panelist



Frank Roberts

FNBO

Vice President & Director,
Community Banking



Frank serves as Managing Director of Community Banking, leading a team of relationship managers that works with businesses. For Frank, his work provides the opportunity to serve the community by helping local businesses fulfill their visions and meet their goals. He is pleased to be a member of the FNBO community where his colleagues match this passion for serving clients in the best manner possible.

Frank has 42 years of experience in commercial banking, serving clients in a wide variety of industries. He joined FNBO's Commercial Banking Team in 1993. Frank earned a Bachelor of Science in Economics and Management from DePauw University in Indiana.

“Workforce & Education” Moderator



Sarah Hartwick

**Illinois
Manufacturers'
Association (IMA)**

Senior Vice President



Sarah Hartwick is Senior Vice President & Corporate Board Secretary in addition to directing the IMA Education Foundation for the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. Prior to joining the IMA in 2021, Sarah was previously the Executive Director of ED-RED, a suburban public school district advocacy organization. Sarah has also served as the Co-Director for Legislative Affairs at the Illinois State Board of Education and has worked with education advocacy organizations including Advance Illinois and the Illinois Head Start Association.

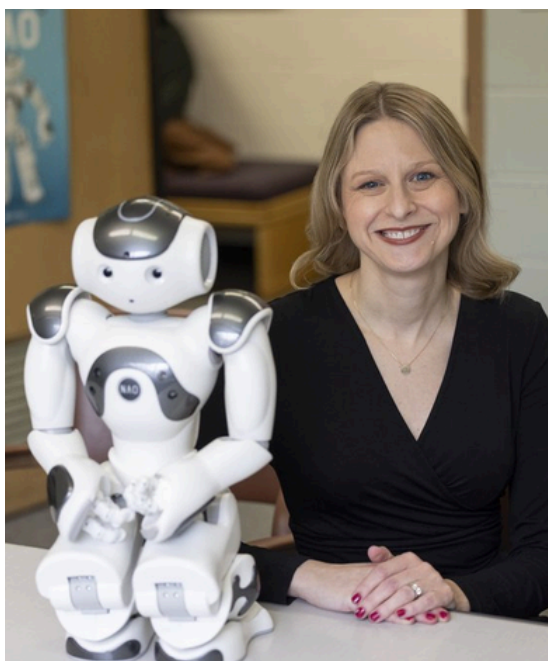
Sarah has a Master's Degree in Public Administration and a Bachelor's degree in political studies with minors in both communications and economics. Sarah has four children.

“Workforce & Education” Panelist

**Andrea L.
Guzman, Ph.D.**

**Northern Illinois
University**

Associate Professor, Dept.
of Communication



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Department of Communication
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Andrea L. Guzman is an expert on human-machine communication (HMC) in the areas of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated journalism. She studies how people make sense of and directly interact with lifelike technologies, including smart assistants (i.e. Siri, Cortana, Alexa), social bots, and robots, as well as the implications of these technologies for individuals and society. Guzman also studies the integration of AI into media industries, including the automation of news production and consumption in journalism. Andrea L. Guzman has a doctorate in communication from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the editor of the forthcoming volume: *Human-Machine Communication: Rethinking Communication, Technology, and Ourselves*, and her research has been published in the *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and *First Monday*. She recently was awarded a research grant to study automated journalism from the Newspaper and Online News Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and has also earned awards for her research at leading conferences including AEJMC and the National Communication Association. A 2017 Kopenhaver Center Fellow, Guzman also has presented her scholarship at premier international conferences including the International Communication Association and the Association of Internet Researchers.

“Workforce & Education” Panelist



Barbara Leach

Kishwaukee College

Vice President of Instruction



Barbara Leach is the Vice President of Instruction at Kishwaukee College where she leads the Office of Instruction in promoting academic excellence, innovative programming, and community responsiveness. She oversees key areas including transfer and career & technical education programs, academic support services, adult education.

Before joining Kishwaukee College, Barbara was a K–12 teacher in the Sycamore School District. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Northern Illinois University and master’s degrees in Instructional Technology and School Counseling from NIU and Liberty University. She is currently completing her Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership. Barbara has a strong commitment to lifelong learning and student-centered education.

“Workforce & Education” Panelist



Ne'Keisha Stepney

Waubonsee Community College

Assistant Provost of
Workforce Development



WAUBONSEE
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Ne'Keisha Stepney serves as the Assistant Provost of Workforce Development at Waubonsee Community College. Since joining the college in 2009, she has served in various leadership roles. In her current role, Stepney oversees programs such as Adult Education, career services, the Small Business Development Center, customized training programs, and numerous other work-based learning initiatives and training to meet regional workforce needs.

Stepney was recognized as the 2024 Dr. Christine J. Sobek Outstanding Administrator Award recipient, an honor that highlights exceptional leadership, strategic decision-making, problem-solving abilities, and a commitment to the college's mission and vision.

Throughout her tenure, Stepney has been instrumental in advocating for CTE at Waubonsee. She is particularly proud of her efforts that contributed to bringing the new Technical Education Center (TEC) to fruition. Set to open in the fall of 2025 at the Sugar Grove Campus, the new TEC will be a 100,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility. It will serve as a central hub for several of the college's CTE programs and drive economic growth and sustainability for the region.

Stepney's connection to CTE is deeply personal; she carries a strong work ethic inherited from generations of skilled trades professionals within her family. The familiar scents of metal shavings in Waubonsee's machine tool lab evoke memories of her mother's long workdays as a CNC operator, reinforcing her dedication to these educational programs.

Excerpts from www.waubonsee.edu/news-events/news/waubonsee-announces-nekeisha-stepney-assistant-provost-workforce-development

“Workforce & Education” Panelist



Kevin Nelson

**Kishwaukee
Education
Consortium (KEC)**

Welding and AET Instructor



Kevin is a twenty-year veteran of automated engineering and welding industry. He has taught welding technology at the Kishwaukee Education Consortium (KEC) for the past 8 years. ; during the first four of those years he also led instruction in the Automated Engineering Academy. He is a proud Waubensee Community College alumnus.

Kevin is an AI Systems Consultant specializing in applied AI integration, in-context learning frameworks, and practical capability development for educational and industry-focused applications. His work is entirely front-end—client-side, application-layer orchestration through conversational interfaces , creating advanced capabilities via structured reinforcement and context-driven learning. Rather than altering foundational code, this approach is intentionally focused on the application layer. This direct method has delivered real-world success, significantly enhancing model performance and user expertise in-context and aligning closely with emerging research on in-context reinforcement learning.

As an industry consultant and speaker, Kevin’s practice is centered on fostering AI literacy among his peers. He defines this as a working understanding of realistic prompt and context engineering, and the mechanistic principles of AI cognition. Through workshops and professional development, he equips fellow educators and industry leaders to engage, adapt, and grow with Artificial Intelligence.