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**Triton College**

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## **Triton Student's Journey From Homeschool to Higher Ed Earns Statewide Nod**



*Triton College student Riley Jirsa is in the running for the ICCTA's Paul Simon Student Essay Contest for Community College Month after writing about his journey from homeschool to higher education.*

**RIVER GROVE, Ill.** — Triton College student Riley Jirsa of Forest Park has been nominated for the Illinois Community College Trustees Association's (ICCTA) Paul Simon Student Essay Contest after submitting an essay detailing his journey from homeschool to higher education and how Triton has made a lasting impact.

The contest, part of ICCTA's celebration of Community College Month, invites Illinois students to describe how community college has changed their lives. The winner, to be announced at a June 5 awards banquet in Lombard, will receive a \$1,000 scholarship.

Jirsa's story reflects the broader role community colleges play in expanding access to higher education, particularly for nontraditional students, and highlights Triton College's commitment to supporting learners from diverse educational backgrounds.

Jirsa wrote about how an under-resourced homeschool education left him nine grade levels behind his peers. After enrolling in Triton College's GED courses, he found a learning environment that nurtured his academic drive and encouraged him to push beyond what he thought possible. After two semesters in the program, Jirsa crossed the stage in June 2024 as a recipient of the National Adult Education Honor Society certificate, with a desire for continued success.

Now, nearly two years later, Jirsa is poised to graduate from Triton with an associate degree and plans to pursue a bachelor's degree.

When he walked into his first classroom after years of studying at home, Jirsa said the experience was initially jarring as he navigated a mix of pride and concern that past academic limitations might hinder his potential.

"I was so unconfident in my academic skills," he said. "I constantly felt like my performance was less than that of my peers, even though I was getting good grades."

But Jirsa soon found friends, community and a sense of belonging. He credits Triton College's Student Life Office with easing the transition and encouraging him to branch out and get involved in student clubs and organizations. Currently, Jirsa holds membership and leadership positions in several campus groups, including Phi Theta Kappa, Triton College Student Association, Program Board, Fashion and Modeling Club and Model Illinois Government.

He is also a co-founder and president of the GED Alumni Mentorship Club, which he helped start to bridge the gap between GED students and the wider Triton community.

For Jirsa, his time at Triton College has been an opportunity to make lifelong connections, strengthen his confidence and forge a future in ways that were previously out of reach.

"Triton College has made a lasting impact on my life by allowing me to find my footing in an environment that prioritized my individual journey," he said. "It has shaped me into a leader and a scholar dedicated to supporting my peers."

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#### **ABOUT TRITON COLLEGE:**

Triton College, located at 2000 Fifth Ave., River Grove, is a public institution of higher education dedicated to student success. Recently recognized by the Aspen Institute as one of the Top 200 community colleges in the nation, Triton offers more than 130 degree and certificate programs that prepare students to pursue meaningful careers, transfer to four-year universities, and thrive in a global economy. Guided by our mission—*Valuing the individual, educating and serving the community*—Triton serves nearly 17,000 students annually on its 110-acre campus in River Grove, Illinois. Our dedicated faculty and staff provide high-quality, accessible and affordable educational opportunities that empower students and strengthens the communities we serve. Triton College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and a member of The

Illinois Community College Board. Illinois is home to 45 colleges in 39 community college districts. Learn more at [triton.edu](http://triton.edu).

