

Illinois
Adult
Education
YOUR PATH. YOUR FUTURE.

**Building Sustainable Statewide Outreach
Systems to Recruit Adult Learners**
A Case Study in Post-Pandemic Strategies
for Adult Education

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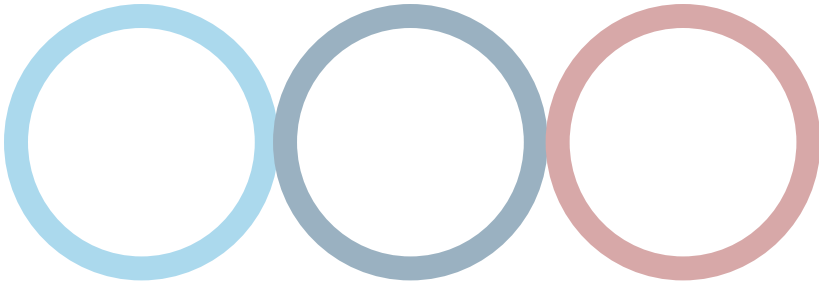


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BACKGROUND AND CASE FOR ACTION IN ILLINOIS

Background

From July 2022 to June 2023, the [Illinois Community College Board \(ICCB\)](#) embarked on a coordinated statewide capacity-building system initiative to support community colleges, school districts, community organizations, and other providers with adult education learner recruitment. Supported by their partners including the Adult Learning Resource Center, Full Capacity Marketing, and Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support, the initiative includes a highly strategic digital statewide campaign to reposition and raise awareness about the value of adult education coupled with communication tools and assets to support enrollment efforts at the local level.

The results have been promising, with 99% of all ICCB programs receiving prospective student leads and clicks on the link to Hotline Program Directory coming in at more than double the standard benchmark. The initiative led to an overall increased enrollment in fiscal year 22 that was 40.5% higher than the total enrollment in fiscal year 21.

In a post-COVID-19 world, economic realignment and student recruitment and retention will play key roles in how well adult education is able to fulfill its part in building the U.S. economy and enhancing the lives of residents in communities across the country. We believe the following detailed account of the strategy we are using can serve as a blueprint for other states seeking to get more adult learners into the classroom.

The Case for Action in Illinois

Even prior to the pandemic, national enrollment in adult education became progressively worse between 2018 and 2020. While Illinois educational attainment is average among U.S. states, ICCB leadership recognized the trends and wanted to be proactive in finding solutions to the declines.

The Illinois educational attainment gaps of the percentages of those populations with a high school diploma or less included the white majority population (32.4%), Latinx (64.1%) and African American (42.2%). While the educational attainment gaps had been decreasing, the pandemic may have reversed that trend as Latinx and African American populations were among the hardest hit by the economic impact. In those areas of high African American populations (Metro Chicago, Metro St. Louis, and the southern parts of the state) and Latinx populations (northeastern and some parts of central Illinois), the need for adult education is even greater with higher percentages of residents needing English classes, their high school equivalency, or both. By far, the greatest need for English Language Acquisition is for native Spanish speakers, but pockets of need exist for addressing the more than 50 different languages represented within the state.

Entry points for the adult education landscape in the U.S. are diverse. Adult education providers include school districts, community colleges and community organizations, as well as private providers. Illinois mirrors this diverse landscape with adult education providers offering programs that serve diverse populations and geographies. The challenges faced by community colleges serving highly rural central and southern Illinois are in many ways dissimilar to the school district or community organizations serving urban/suburban populations around Chicago.

For example, it can be more challenging in some parts of the state for adult schools to develop pathway programs that lead to careers for adult learners because baseline educational levels are lower than in other parts of the state. Yet we knew prospective students were interested in career training. At the height of the pandemic, [Strada's Education Consumer Survey](#) estimated that 20.5 million working-age adults, ages 25 to 64, intended to pursue further education and training. The survey cautioned that additional guidance and coaching would be critical to help sidelined adult learners, who may experience self-doubt and lack access to clear information about opportunities. Strada also reported that those Americans with less education are most likely to be left behind from an economic standpoint.

Even the pivot to online education was less successful in adult education than in other sectors due to the typical adult education student's inaccessibility to reliable internet service and laptops or other technology. However, moving classes online provided an opportunity for those who did have internet/device access, but previously lacked the ability to access adult education on campus.

It was against this backdrop that the ICCB and its partners developed a statewide outreach campaign to increase student enrollment and to give adult education providers the tools and resources needed to implement the campaign in their communities.

Given the unique regions of Illinois, there were three key objectives for the project:

- Create a statewide campaign framework easily tailored for local outreach efforts while simultaneously building awareness across the state about the value of adult education in rebuilding lives post pandemic.
- Increase student enrollments statewide by helping local practitioners build their capacity to achieve the necessary touchpoints required to enroll students; and
- Integrate Illinois' existing adult education outreach networks to develop a coordinated, sustainable system for ongoing campaigns that addresses enrollment declines.



The initiative led to an overall increased enrollment in fiscal year 22 that was **40.5%** higher than the total enrollment in fiscal year 21.



PROJECT PLAYBOOK

The Project Playbook

The campaign included four phases:

1. Market research using demographic & psychographic profiling
2. Consumer-tested campaign themes and messaging
3. A field-directed communications plan to address various compositions of adult learner programs
4. Capacity-building online learning & technical assistance, ROI scorecard & evaluation process

Phase 1: Market Research

With limited budgets and a rapidly changing landscape, it is more important than ever to segment potential students demographically and psychographically to ensure the right message reaches the right student. It is important to understand what motivates someone to spend time and resources on training and education.

Market data drives informed decisions about what message platforms and communication mediums resonate best with different adult learner demographic profiles. Project partner, Full Capacity Marketing (FCM), developed market segments for each adult education program area, including adult basic education, English as a Second Language, adult secondary education, vocational education, and career technical education, which included demographic profiles with an overlay of psychological characteristics and traits, such as values, desires, goals, interests, and lifestyle choices. The results beget an accurate understanding of student behaviors and why they will, or will not, invest their time and resources in adult education. These profiles were then used to create personas that were used to develop a broad campaign message, along with tailored messaging to move each market segment to action.

To aid in the process, FCM conducted a meta-analysis of current research available to develop identified market segments for adult learners across Illinois. Because the segments contained a blend of demographic and psychographic data, FCM used sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Pew Research, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Board of Higher Education, Coalition on Adult Basic Education, and other proprietary and non-proprietary sources.

During the process, a long list of questions had to be answered to fully understand the situation and to develop a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). Among them:

- What barriers and motivators do prospective students face in today's interim recovery pandemic environment?
- What are the collective strengths and opportunities of the adult education system as part of the brand strategy?
- How can adult education offerings be collectively packaged in a statewide campaign to help raise

awareness among adult learners about the value of adult education?

- How will the campaign serve as a centralized point of contact for adult learners for resources and information that is easily understood based on their emotional psyches?
- What are the overall broad messages that will engage prospective learners with adult education?
- What value propositions will resonate and motivate prospective students?
- What are the best mediums to reach prospective students to raise awareness across the state?

In addition to identifying the demographic and psychographic market segments, FCM also conducted a thorough current-state communications audit to evaluate current outreach efforts across the state compared to benchmark results. FCM then focused on an analysis of a sampling of local outreach plans as part of the baseline analysis of current marketing efforts.

In developing a statewide approach, this process is critical because the composition of both students and programs vary widely based on the area of the state. Some local adult education programs had no marketing structure at all while community colleges had multiple staff assigned to moving a prospective student through the enrollment funnel. One size does not fit all in terms of statewide outreach and these factors play a role in messaging and planning.

Phase 2: Campaign Themes and Messaging

In Phase 2, personas were created for each of the agreed-upon market segments to help inform the campaign theme and messaging that would most likely resonate with adult learners across Illinois. Student personas are fictional, generalized representations of the ideal student, those members of the target population most likely to enroll in adult education. Developing a persona that connects emotionally with everyone involved in the outreach process enables the development of more impactful messaging, along with a detailed media plan. Personas allowed the application of the data-driven messaging to reach highly targeted market segments through multi-channel advertising and publicity campaigns.

Psychographic modeling was used to identify campaign themes and messaging because it's proven to work.

Gallup research has reported that about 70% of decisions are based on emotional factors and only 30% are based on rational factors. Because of the diversity in Illinois' adult education landscape, it was important to use psychographic modeling to find the emotional "why" for each target market. Adult education and how it can be a driver for improving students' lives and solving their unique pain points mean different things to different market segments. While an overarching campaign theme builds awareness throughout the state about adult education, the localized, emotional messages for individual market segments drive leads and enrollment.

FCM had already compiled extensive demographic and psychographic research on a national level to help create a clear picture around the motivators of adult learners. This is how a national partnership with the Coalition of Adult Basic Education developed the [#MoveAheadWithAdultEd](#) brand for a national adult learner recruitment campaign. Many programs have adapted this campaign theme with much success, mirroring the look-and-feel and benefiting from the national advertising buy, as [Finalsite](#) reports that it can take anywhere from 5-12 touchpoints to get a student to enroll (e.g., ads, social media, website). The campaign partners worked with a broad taskforce to narrow the campaign themes and message points and then tested the engagement rate throughout the state. The winning theme became: “Your Path. Your Future.”

Phase 3: Field-Directed Communications Plan

It’s integral to the process that all partners are invested in a high level of collaboration to ensure complete unification and consensus on goals, strategies, and creative direction. A project taskforce with representation from all of Illinois’ current adult education providers informed FCM at key milestones during the development and execution of the statewide campaign. With ICCB’s direction and leadership, FCM worked with the taskforce on its key recommendations to acquire input and buy-in before execution. As noted in Phase 1 of FCM’s approach, it was key to evaluate current state strengths and opportunities to recommend specific outreach strategies and tactics of high value to the providers. ICCB identified key marketing plans from across the state for FCM’s evaluation, coupled with provider focus group interviews to pinpoint final recommendations.

While ICCB had a hotline, provider locator, and an organizational website with valuable information for providers, FCM recommended developing a simplified student recruitment-focused microsite that was branded with the campaign theme and contained key emotional messages that resonated with the identified market segments. The purpose of this microsite was to use the campaign theme as the domain name in advertising to drive traffic to one location. The campaign’s purpose was to capture contact information and leads for local programs; the campaign microsite housed the contact form to create leads for local programs and links to the Illinois Adult Learning Hotline and ICCB’s provider locator -- all in one convenient location.

Awareness & Lead Generation Campaign

Illinois’ landscape of adult education providers encompasses community colleges, school districts and community organizations -- each with different available budgets for localized outreach campaigns, different approval processes (e.g., public information officers at community colleges), and varying levels of expertise in conducting strategic outreach. Because of this diversity, the media plan and the toolkit needed to be applicable within multiple environments while generating leads across the state to boost enrollments. Because of this, FCM

recommended a two-pronged approach that provided high value regardless of the operational configuration of the schools.

Statewide Media Plan

First, the statewide campaign created increased awareness about the value of adult education while building on the established communication resources in place, including the Illinois Adult Learning Hotline and provider locator tool. When evaluating the Illinois media landscape, there were several opportunities to use broad-based mediums to elevate awareness about the value of adult education and push traffic to the campaign microsite with the hotline and/or provider locator to generate leads. Advertising was scheduled to run year-round with increased advertising during key enrollment periods.

For sustainability, FCM deployed a train-the-trainer model with the Adult Learning Resource Center (ALRC) team members to disperse leads from the statewide website and digital platforms. The ALRC team was already responsible for the statewide hotline, which was incorporated as a call to action for prospective students to locate an adult education provider. Local providers were identified as a primary contact to receive the leads and the professional development events provided instruction on the best practices for converting the leads to enrollment.

Localized Campaigns & Toolkit

The second part of the strategy was localized campaigns. Because each area had varying degrees of expertise in running localized digital ad campaigns, FCM created two types of toolkit items: one to support those who have expertise and budget for a digital approach and one for those who needed to rely more on grassroots outreach efforts. For the Illinois campaign, FCM developed a specific [campaign landing page](#) around the theme, “Your Path. Your Future.” and a toolkit that included brand guidelines, logos, fact sheets, press release templates, social media posts, flyer templates, posters, digital ads and website banners, bus shelter and mall signs, radio scripts, and billboard artwork.

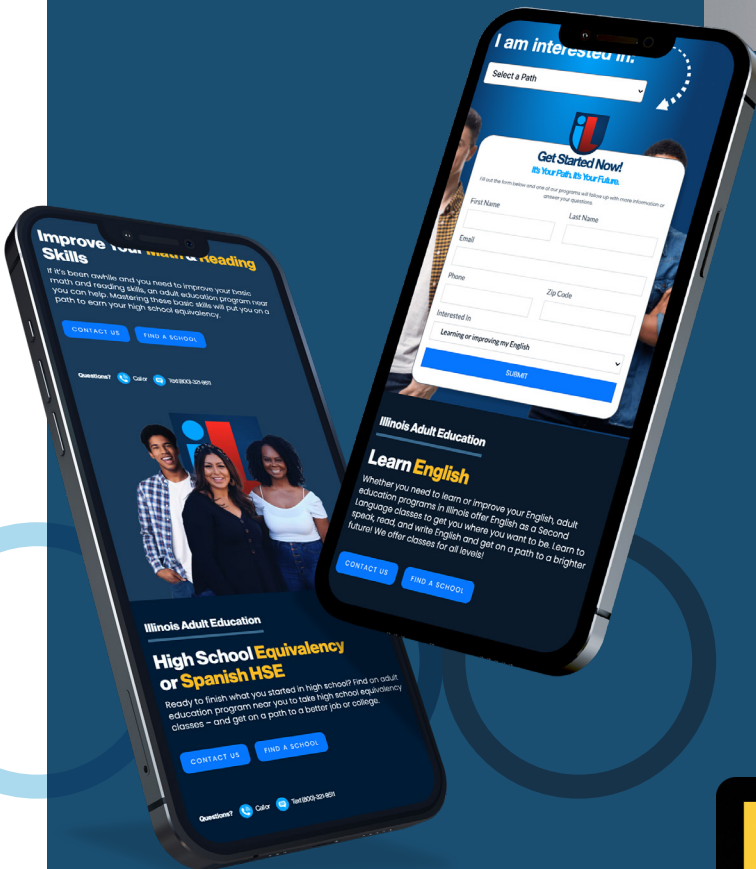
Phase 4: Capacity-Building, ROI Scorecard & Evaluation

The project team worked closely to produce learning events that both provided a roadmap on how to apply specific tactics, while also emphasizing why action is important. To plan the learning events, the necessary skill sets needed by local programs were identified to help them deploy a localized campaign that aligned with the statewide efforts. The Communications Audit (Phase 1) was critical in assessing the skill sets and establishing desired learning outcomes for the entire campaign. A series of webinars and other materials were made available on the [ICCB website](#). These included strategies and tactics to create the campaign, how on-site technical assistance will be delivered to build capacity, the process for the development and dissemination of outreach toolkits, and the identification of an evaluation plan to ensure increased enrollments.

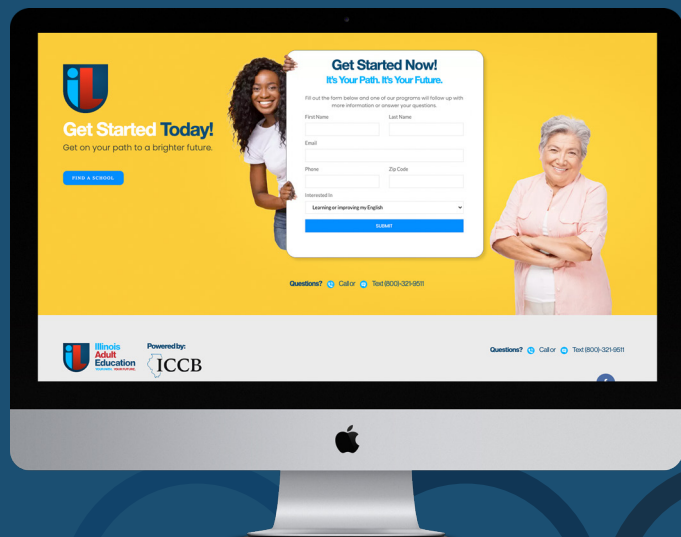
Campaign Brand & Landing Page



Mobile Version



Lead Capturing Form



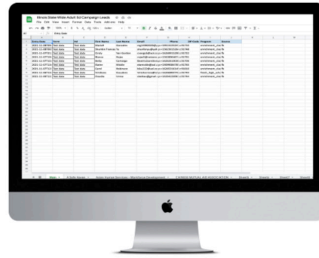
Leads

How do you **get leads** from the campaign?

1 Leads will come to FCM from various advertising platforms.



2 FCM will upload leads into each programs' individual spreadsheet on the web.



3 Program can check leads daily (more frequently is better) and follow up with potential students.



Email will be sent each time a lead is uploaded

Each program will be provided with a unique link to check their leads.



Toolkit to Support Local Lead Generation



Capacity Building Tools



STATEWIDE RESULTS

Statewide Results

The statewide campaign ended June 2023 and the analytics of this model (Table 1) reflect a success story in the making, with more than 4.5M impressions and 99% of ICCB programs receiving leads to help boost enrollments. Most importantly, the initiative led to an overall increased student enrollment in fiscal year 2022 that was 40.5% higher than the total enrollment in fiscal year 2021.

Table 1: Campaign Analytics

Metrics	Cumulative Results	Comments
Impressions	4,515,753	The number of times the ads were shown/appeared in someone's feed (target 7M-8M) as this would reach 85% of the market 5-6 times.
Clicks on Ads/Engagement	87,147	The total number of clicks on ads which is a sign of interest in adult education (target 74,000 over the year).
Click-Through Rate (CTR)	1.93%	Clicks divided by impressions which measures the level of interest overall (target > national benchmark of .90).
Leads To Date	4,563	People who clicked on an ad and completed the interest form.
Unique Website Visits	28,195	Number of unique visitors to website
Number of Programs Receiving Leads	74	99% of all ICCB programs received leads.
Click-Through Rate of text messages to Hotline Program Directory	17%	Clicks on link to Hotline Program Directory divided by # of texts sent (benchmark is 9.1%).

ICCB ensured that various events were leveraged to encourage participation in the campaign at conferences, dedicated meetings, and town halls. Local adult education programs provided peer-to-peer support on how they used the **campaign toolkit** locally. For instance, Lewis & Clark Community College **shared their innovations** in adapting the campaign to their local area by building a strong social media presence, networking with workforce development organizations and regular podcasting. Parkland Community College **shared their teamwork approach** to moving a lead through various touchpoints through the enrollment funnel. While PODER, which empowers Spanish-speaking adult immigrants to create successful and fulfilling new lives, **adapted the branding and visuals** specifically to target their populations, and the **Polish American Association** utilized the assets to expand its reach and enrollment numbers.





THE NEXT CHAPTER



The Next Chapter

Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's Commission on Workforce Equity and Access recently undertook a comprehensive human-centered design process to better understand the needs of workers and employers. As ICCB has now laid the foundational work for creating a coordinated and sustainable approach to student recruitment, the next frontier in systems building will focus on alignment with the [Governor's plan](#) around three core principles of being accessible, inclusive, and responsive to both workers and employers alike.

A Look at the Partners

Illinois Community College Board (ICCB)

The ICCB was created in 1965 by the Illinois General Assembly to create a system of public community colleges that would be within easy reach of every resident. More than 50 years later, the Illinois Community College System covers the entire state with 48 colleges and one multi-community college center in 39 community college districts. Community colleges serve nearly one million Illinois residents each year in credit and noncredit courses and many more through their public service programs.

Adult Learning Resource Center ALRC:

The ALRC has served as a mainstay for ESL professional development and technical assistance in Illinois since 1974 and served as the local project lead. Over the years, ALRC's professional development (PD) expertise has evolved and expanded in response to changing federal and state initiatives to include PD for evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI), educational technology, standards-based instruction, and career pathways preparation. ALRC has developed strong working relationships with national and local experts in ESL, EBRI, educational technology, and career pathways preparation. It has also been part of numerous federal adult education initiatives sponsored by OCTAE and the USCIS Office of Citizenship. ALRC leveraged these initiatives and its deep connections statewide and nationally to build a sustainable system and integrate them into the statewide campaign.

Full Capacity Marketing, Inc (FCM):

FCM is a national consultancy specializing in brand storytelling and strategic communications for those in workforce, education, and entrepreneurship sectors. Their data-driven expertise in psychographic modeling, research, communications strategies, outreach campaigns, and capacity building has helped more than 500 K12/postsecondary education and workforce development organizations nationwide. The 20+ year old agency has earned 75 global awards for its communications strategies in workforce and education.

Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support (ICSPS)

ICSPS resides in the Educational Administration and Foundations department in the College of Education and supports the success of every learner through the comprehensive application of research-based practices, encouraging professionals to educate equitably, and offering expertise in creating excellent learning environments through professional development events.





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