



The Michigan Center for Adult College Success

## The Ultimate Group Project: Re-Engaging Adult Learners in Kalamazoo



Seven hundred and fifty Kalamazoo Promise Scholars have started their college journeys only to have life get in the way. Now, Western Michigan University (WMU) is leading a targeted effort to bring them back. Supported by an Innovation Investment Award (IIA) from The Michigan Center for Adult College Success, WMU has partnered with the Kalamazoo Promise and Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC) to help students reclaim their education and put their remaining scholarship dollars to work through a coordinated, person-centered support system.

At the heart of the work is a small, deeply committed team that blends outreach, relationship building, and hands-on guidance.

The initiative is structured through the Kalamazoo Promise, which serves as a hub for outreach and scholar engagement. Alyssa Moon, Director of Instructional Design and Development at Western and Coty Dunten, Promise's Senior Director of Scholar Engagement, authored the grant proposal

that secured the Innovation Investment Award. Their team is responsible for the outreach staff funded through the partnership, turning resources into real, on-the-ground support.

"The funds from Western flow to the Promise to help us hire and support this outreach team," Coty shares. "Because we already had the structure in place, we were able to move quickly to get people hired, get them trained, and get out into the community. That speed matters when you're trying to reach adults who might already feel disconnected from college."

The outreach specialists are the "boots on the ground" of the project, meeting adult learners

where they are both figuratively and literally. As Community Outreach Specialists, Jodi Glover and De'Tavia Moore spend their time building trust, listening to barriers, and helping adults navigate their way back into education.

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Jodi and DeTavia don't simply hand out flyers or send emails. Instead, they focus on relationships. They talk with potential students about their goals, their families, their work schedules, and the challenges that may have pushed them away from college in the first place. From there, they connect them with the right people at Western, KVCC, or other community partners.

Marie Rodriguez helps anchor the effort, managing key logistics and partnerships. She supports the day-to-day operations, from coordinating meetings with Western and KVCC staff to handling invoices and administrative tasks. Beyond paperwork, she is actively engaged in community work and networking with local organizations, always looking for new ways to collaborate and better serve adult learners.

The Innovation Investment Award from The Center makes it possible to weave these pieces together. The result is a more seamless experience for adult learners who may feel unsure about returning to school. Rather than having to navigate multiple institutions on their own, they encounter a coordinated team that already knows how to work together.

For WMU, the project is also helping to redefine what it means to serve adult learners. By partnering closely with KVCC and the Promise, WMU is reaching students earlier, supporting them more holistically, and staying with them as they move between institutions. So far, WMU has helped more than 70 students this academic year to re-enroll to pursue their degrees.

Everyone involved says they see the Innovation Investment Award as more than just a grant: it is a catalyst for building a long-term, sustainable model of collaboration that can grow beyond the initial project period. The hope is that, over time, the systems and relationships built through this work will make it easier for any adult learner in Kalamazoo to find a pathway back to education that is tailored to their own life.

For students like India Mullen, this shift toward a more human, guided experience has been transformative. "Having support during my time in school means everything to me," India explains. "Knowing that someone is willing to walk alongside me, listen, and help guide me through challenges has made this process feel less overwhelming and more achievable. It reminds me that I'm not doing this alone."

Through this forward-thinking partnership, supported by The Center's Innovation Investment Award, WMU and its partners are showing what's possible when institutions share resources, align their efforts, and put adult learners at the center of the work.

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— India Mullen

#### **About the Innovation Investment Awards**

*The Michigan Center for Adult College Success is supporting nine institutions through the Innovation Investment Awards to help postsecondary institutions implement best practices or pilot new ideas to better serve adult students in a way that increases completion rates.*

*The Center awarded \$6.4 million in Innovation Investment Awards through a competitive award process to postsecondary institutions seeking to implement innovative solutions for improving persistence and completion rates among adult learners over the age of 25. Grants of up to \$1 million were awarded to Michigan colleges and universities that show they are ready to launch effective, lasting improvements to systems that help students 25 and older obtain postsecondary credentials.*

