Midwest community college boasts 18% higher retention during coaching phase of multi-year student success redesign

INSTITUTION: Illinois Central College
TYPE: Community College
STUDENT BASE: Traditional and adult learners, predominantly part time
The Opportunity

As a major provider of educational opportunity, Illinois Central College (ICC) enables academic development and economic mobility to one in four graduating high school seniors in their region. With their impact in mind, ICC sought a sustainable student-support solution to increase retention through direct coaching and by redesigning their academic advising services. ICC partnered with InsideTrack to develop a four-year, two-phase program with the aim of doing just that.

PHASE 1: RETENTION COACHING

The Partnership

During the first year, InsideTrack connected one-on-one with 400 students to help them set and achieve goals and tap into campus resources — all in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Impact

After the first year, ICC saw an 18 percent gain in retention among students who received coaching, versus their non-coached peers. African American and part-time students boasted particularly high retention rates compared to their non-coached peers.

PHASE 2: CAPACITY BUILDING

The Partnership

Phase 2 progressed into a multi-stage capacity building program in which ICC staff received coach training and development to expand staff capabilities, improve student outcomes and ultimately redesign academic advising services.

The Impact

While Phase 2 continues until 2023, recent student satisfaction survey results showed a 95 percent overall satisfaction rate with ICC academic advising — 14.7 percentage points higher than before the academic advising redesign.
Located in the heart of the prairie state, Illinois Central College (ICC) serves all or parts of 10 counties in the center of the state. ICC is a major driver of educational and economic opportunity in the region, with a majority of students receiving some form of financial aid. One out of every four graduating high school seniors in the region move on to ICC. Staff members are passionate about enhancing the academic and personal development of all students through a full range of support services.

To that end, ICC leadership was looking to bring two major student support goals to campus:

**BOOST RETENTION THROUGH COACHING**
Use coaching as a proof-of-concept pilot program as part of Title III funding, showing that coaching can make an impact.

When reviewing ways to increase student retention, leaders at ICC used the landmark study published in 2013 by Stanford researchers Dr. Rachel Baker and Dr. Eric Bettinger, evaluating the performance of InsideTrack coaching as a student-success intervention. The results showed significant increases in student persistence and graduation of coached students. InsideTrack coaching has been recognized as a high-impact, high-evidence program by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse of evidence-based practices. ICC not only decided to include coaching in their advising redesign — they also decided to partner with InsideTrack to provide that coaching.

**UNDERGO AN ACADEMIC ADVISING REDESIGN**
Add capacity building as a way to integrate coaching methodology into all student-facing support services.

Making the decision to work with InsideTrack went beyond student coaching. The desire was a complete academic advising redesign to ensure sustainable change. The outcome — funded through a Title III Strengthening Institutions grant — is a comprehensive four-year program designed to:

- Transform ICC’s approach to academic advising from transactional to transformational
- Increase consistency and quality of service across all advisors
- Decrease dependence on face-to-face, on-campus appointments and leverage technology to meet students where they’re at in ways that work for them
The partnership between Illinois Central College and InsideTrack was designed to flow over the course of four years — from October 2019 through September 2023. As retention coaching kicked off in year one, a comprehensive capacity building program also got underway — a program that will wrap up at the end of year four. Through rigorous, long-term training, ICC academic advisors and staff members will utilize coaching to transform their work with students, enabling them to provide higher quality support and greater student impact. This chart provides a quick overview of what happens during each of the four years:

### ICC Four-Year Program Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE 1: RETENTION COACHING</th>
<th>PHASE 2: CAPACITY BUILDING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Coaching</td>
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<td>Foundational and Ongoing Coach Training</td>
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<td>Coaching Quality Development</td>
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<td>Coach Certification</td>
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<td>Trainer and Observer Certification</td>
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<td>Manager Development Program</td>
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Our partnership with InsideTrack is about unlocking the full potential of both our students and our staff by enhancing our capability to support students in successfully navigating obstacles to graduation.

— Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey, President, Illinois Central College
The Partnership

Phase 1: Direct coaching

The first phase of this four-year program was a year of direct coaching to increase student retention. For the coaching pilot program, 400 students who met the ICC-devised criteria were randomly assigned to participate. Criteria included students with lower GPAs, along with a mix of full-time/part-time students in their first or second terms. This group of students was compared to a similar non-coached group in order to measure impact.

Direct coaching participant demographics (400 students)

Started in January 2020, retention coaching helped students clarify goals, identify obstacles, persist through challenges and stay connected to their reasons for pursuing their education. Helping students tap into campus resources adds another layer of support — connecting them to everything from financial aid and academic advising to tutoring, career services, and even organizations and clubs. Students learn that it’s OK to ask for help and that setbacks are normal — for all students. Through retention coaching, students know that someone is always in their corner.

In March of 2020, with coaching well underway, the ICC campus (along with the rest of the world) was shut down by COVID-19. Jolleen Quimba, InsideTrack Retention Coach, remembers it well. “Before coaching started, I met with ICC student services staff and got to know their student population. We worked together on uncovering the students’ underlying needs and the best ways to address those needs. Not long after launching the coaching program, COVID hit — and everything changed.”
And even though everything turned upside down overnight, InsideTrack’s virtual model ensured that coaches were able to continue to connect with students — using phone, text and email rather than relying on in-person meetings. Even in the best of circumstances, finding time for in-person meetings can be hard for staff and students alike, which is another advantage of our time-tested coaching model.

**Transparency for students, trends for staff**

Along with connecting with students one-on-one, InsideTrack coaches were also documenting student issues and relaying that information to the school. “We told ICC administrators what we were hearing from students — what they were struggling with, where they needed help — and those insights were used to make quick student support changes on the fly,” said Quimba. She remembers helping to get students the tech they needed to go remote (such as laptops and internet hotspots) and working with students in trade fields — like welding — that required in-person training in the area.

Mila Buckland was another InsideTrack coach working with ICC students throughout the 2020 pilot program. “When COVID shut down the campus, students didn’t know how to navigate the sudden uncertainty and the loss of community. They weren’t sure what to do so they could move forward.” She remembers working on monthly strategies with her students. “We talked about creating calendars for events, papers, tests and due dates. We talked about ways to stay connected now that they were remote. These were anchors for students in a time of constant transition.”

**A community of students**

According to Buckland, ICC really wanted to stay connected to their students. “They were keenly aware of the need for holistic student support — and that included using coaching as another way to stay connected.” Many of the students she worked with were non-traditional adult students, often first generation. “We worked to maintain a sense of community, even though many students were isolated in rural areas. Monthly emails gave them a consistent presence. And whenever a student engaged, we used phone calls and texts to go deeper.” Buckland says she worked directly with students to allay their concerns and provide transparency, which allowed the school to say they didn’t have all the answers. “We were definitely all in this together.”

> When COVID hit, we worked to support students and provide as much information and access as possible, removing barriers whenever possible as sweeping changes were happening in real time.

— Jolleen Quimba, Retention Coach, InsideTrack
Phase 1: Results

ICC saw retention gains in both the first semester and the entire year — both of which took place predominantly during the initial phases of COVID-19, when campus shut down and students were forced to quickly adapt to remote learning. According to Jill Blair, Title III project director at ICC, “The fact that we were able to get such amazing results — and during a pandemic, no less — shows how valuable our partnership with InsideTrack is. And the actionable insights we received will make a positive difference to all students.”

Strong retention growth despite a year of COVID

Coaching outreach quickly adapted to meet the “in flux” needs of the students — many of whom were working students — by connecting with these students using emails, phone calls, text messages and Zoom meetings.

Knowing this was a pilot program, ICC methodically included all ICC students in the data, showing the results between not coached and coached. The impact on spring-to-spring persistence was significant, with 18 percent higher retention rates among all coached students (vs. non-coached students) — including a 23 percent increase among part-time students and a 33 percent increase among African American students.

The complete set of numbers shows that coaching works — even during the introduction of a pandemic, when postsecondary persistence dropped dramatically, especially at community colleges.
InsideTrack’s results are even more significant considering that according to a 2021 study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, nationwide persistence rates for first-time students entering community college in 2019 dropped 3.5 percentage points to 58.5 percent, the largest drop among all segments.

Coaches share insights gained from students with school administrators, especially valuable during the pandemic.

Spring-to-Spring Persistence Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SPRING 2018</th>
<th>SPRING 2019</th>
<th>SPRING 2020</th>
<th>% Point Increase</th>
<th>InsideTrack Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All ICC</td>
<td>All ICC</td>
<td>Not Coached</td>
<td>Coached</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OVERALL</strong></td>
<td>53.23%</td>
<td>58.64%</td>
<td>51.58%</td>
<td>60.65%</td>
<td>+9.1 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Full Time</strong></td>
<td>58.77%</td>
<td>59.63%</td>
<td>47.63%</td>
<td>54.30%</td>
<td>+6.7 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Part Time</strong></td>
<td>49.81%</td>
<td>58.02%</td>
<td>54.03%</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>+12.6 pts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>African American</strong></td>
<td>43.02%</td>
<td>43.53%</td>
<td>44.31%</td>
<td>58.73%</td>
<td>+14.4 pts</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dev. Placed</strong></td>
<td>53.05%</td>
<td>55.77%</td>
<td>49.94%</td>
<td>59.84%</td>
<td>+9.9 pts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Derek’s Story

HOW A DETERMINED STUDENT AND HIS ADVISOR ENGINEERED A PATH TO SUCCESS

Derek had always wanted to be an engineer, a career with “practical value.” His dream job would be to design and test robotic systems. Homeschooled until he was a sophomore in high school, Derek had to drop out at age 16 to help pay the bills — and his dream seemed to fade away. According to him, he had likely achieved high school equivalency in a few areas. “But,” he notes, “I hadn’t finished pre-algebra or learned any science.”

Karen Giesler, a Student Success Advisor at Illinois Central College, remembers the day she went to support her team at an ICC workforce expo. While she was there, she chatted with the GED prep group and one of the instructors pulled her aside. “I’ve got this student...” she explained. And thus began her long association with Derek.

UNCOVERING THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Once Derek got his GED and enrolled in ICC, he continued working with Karen throughout his studies. “Derek could pretty much hold his own with academics while working 30-40 hours per week. He would reach out to tell me what was going wrong and we would work on solutions.” Then came spring of 2021, with Derek’s job pushing him to work even more hours — and the load became too much.

― Karen Gielser, Student Success Advisor, Illinois Central College
“Derek ended up withdrawing from two courses. During this time, he was working late hours, then staying up until 4 or 5 a.m. to complete homework before going back to ICC for classes,” says Karen. “When I asked Derek why he needed to work so much, his answer was ‘because I have bills.’ Most often when we hear this response, it relates to the cell phone, car insurance, and other typical young adult expenses. But when I took a deeper dive and asked Derek ‘what bills,’ his reply shocked me.”

“Rent, utilities, food... he said. This unveiled his situation and helped explain things. He was providing the bare living necessities for him and his mother.”

**FINDING A SCHOLARSHIP TO SIMPLIFY THE SCHEDULE**

As part of ICC’s partnership with InsideTrack, Karen received in-depth and ongoing training on InsideTrack’s evidence-based, research-proven coaching methodology. So she was well prepared to help Derek when his situation became too much for him to handle. “No two students are the same, so working with them one-on-one creates a challenge in how to best reach them. The structure, methodology and process provided by InsideTrack helps navigate this best and has validated my beliefs in success coaching.”

Derek says that having Karen as his advisor was extremely helpful. “She helped me schedule the correct classes in a way so that the coursework didn’t become too overwhelming. She also helped me obtain a scholarship which allowed me to work fewer hours at my job, and, in turn, helped improve my grades.” And making an already overtaxed schedule work was key.

**TO GRADUATION AND BEYOND**

So what’s next for Derek, who earned his Associate in Engineering Science degree following the Summer 2022 term? “I’m headed to Bradley University to finish my engineering bachelor’s degree.” And what does success look like to this hard-working young man whose family circumstances meant college was likely not in the cards? “For me personally, success is staying on the path I’m on now. I honestly didn’t see myself having this opportunity, so I’m excited to keep trying. I had a great time at ICC and really enjoyed learning from all the professors here. I’m grateful for the chance to study engineering.”

― Derek, Associate in Engineering Science, Illinois Central College
The Partnership

Phase 2: Providing increased student support from within

The second phase of the partnership was capacity building to transform student advising. This phase is designed to run through September of 2023 in several stages. InsideTrack’s Capacity Building solution works with institutions to build and enhance their own student-support functions, creating a comprehensive solution that improves student outcomes and staff capabilities while generating a return on investment that equips institutions to sustain these advances internally.

Initially, cohorts of ICC staff were extensively trained in InsideTrack coaching methodology. The first cohort had 20 ICC staff members, followed by a second cohort of workforce-development and adult-education staff members. The idea here was for the ICC team to learn to integrate coaching into everything they do — creating a total advising redesign.

Along with receiving Foundational Coach Training from InsideTrack, ICC leaders also made the decision to invest in change management training from Prosci. This gave them the tools they needed to lead the “people part” of change, essential to the advising redesign.

This initiative follows the case-management model for academic advising, giving trained staff members the title of Student Success Advisor. As such, each advisor is assigned to a specific cluster of academic programs. This allows them to get to know the students better, while students know that any advisor within their cluster is a go-to for help. “This structure supports a more proactive and strategic way of supporting students,” says Kristin Gurrola, Strategic Partnership Director at InsideTrack.
Greater capacity, greater support

In 2021, during year two, services included program management and change support, coaching quality development, coaching certification, manager development program, and ongoing coaching training.

In 2022, year three includes program management and change support, coaching quality development, coaching certification, management development program, trainer certification, observer certification, and ongoing coaching training.

Building comprehensive change for sustainable impact

Now in the third year of the four-year partnership, everything is on track to integrate coaching and coaching methodology into the way ICC advisors support all students, creating an entirely new academic advising approach. For ICC advisors, this includes a variety of training:

- Foundational Coach Training is complete, monthly trainings are ongoing
- Quality development support and coaching certification
- New organizational structure in advising — Lead Student Success Advisors will provide leadership for groups of Student Success Advisors assigned by academic clusters

In addition, training for workforce and adult education advisors is underway. By mid-2022, select ICC staff will receive trainer certification and observer certification, allowing them to train (and observe for quality assurance) their own student success advisors and other staff members. By the end of 2022, the goal is to have coaching fully integrated into academic advising and other student-support functions, able to grow and be sustained into 2023 and for years to come.

“Redesigning advising to focus on increasing student success and persistence is a strategic priority for the college, and working with InsideTrack has been a core piece of that strategy. They have empowered our advisors through professional development and coaching certification, and more importantly, have enabled us to build our own capacity to develop and sustain student success coaching and transform the way we think about advising and student success.”

— Dr. Kari Schimmel, Associate Vice President, Institutional Effectiveness & Innovation, Illinois Central College
Phase 2: Results to Date

Phase 2 is all about staff development for the purpose of better serving student needs. As such, student satisfaction is a key metric of impact. Students who completed an advising appointment with an ICC Student Success Advisor were sent satisfaction surveys to complete and return. Here are the highlights tabulated from two specifically timed surveys:

"Mostly / Very Satisfied" with their advising session
Collected Nov. 2020 – Mar. 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE Advising Redesign</th>
<th>87.3%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFTER Advising Redesign</td>
<td>96.7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

"Mostly / Very Satisfied" with ICC advising in general
Collected Apr. – Dec. 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE Advising Redesign</th>
<th>80.3%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFTER Advising Redesign</td>
<td>95%</td>
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</table>

When comparing their advising sessions and advising at ICC in general, students rated their individual sessions after the advising redesign 9.4 percentage points higher while their impression of ICC advising overall rose 14.7 percentage points after the redesign — and these very high satisfaction rates came after just one year.

These results speak to the impact of having ICC staff integrate InsideTrack coaching skills into their day-to-day advising routine, and the positive impact it has on students.

A partnership for transformational impact

As the four-year partnership continues, the focus on training and development will deepen to ensure that ICC can sustain the impact on student success beyond the program.

"Since I’ve worked with students for over 15 years, I found InsideTrack’s Foundational Coaching Training extremely helpful and purposeful. I especially like that it’s a framework where I can add my own techniques and verbiage to meet students’ needs. It has been an invaluable experience."

— Karen Giesler, Lead Student Success Advisor, Illinois Central College

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