

Developing a Strategic Communications Plan:

Improving Community Engagement in Adult Literacy

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Literacy Action of Central Arkansas

ABOUT THE LITERACY ACTION OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

The mission of Literacy Action is “to advance literacy among adults in Pulaski and Faulkner Counties through private tutoring, advocacy, and community collaboration.” Founded in 1987, the organization has been working for 26 years on ensuring that all adults in Pulaski and Faulkner counties have the basic literacy skills to gain family-sustaining employment, read to their children, and live healthy lives. This non-profit offers free literacy instruction for adults, provides free English instruction for non-native speakers, and educates the public on adult literacy issues. More information about Literacy Action is available at www.literacylittlerock.org

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Jessica Boyd (Little Rock, Arkansas) – Boyd earned bachelor’s degrees in anthropology, Spanish and Latin American studies from the University of Arkansas. She studied abroad in Puebla, Mexico and is now enrolled in the concurrent MBA/MPS program with the UA Walton College of Business. She has worked as a social research intern with The Sustainability Consortium and has volunteered with Susan G. Komen and the UA Volunteer Action Center.

Matthew Caston (Jackson, Mississippi) – Caston studied journalism and creative writing at Alcorn State University and Mississippi College, where he was editor of the student newspaper. He worked for the past five years as a writer for weekly and bi-weekly newspapers and completed an internship with Mississippi Public Broadcasting. He recently was an intern and later communications fellow with the Foundation for the Mid South.

Sean O’Keefe (Seattle, Washington) – A graduate of the University of Chicago where he studied Arabic and history, O’Keefe recently worked as an Arabic teacher with One World Now!, which works with underserved children in Seattle public schools. He has lived in Jordan, where he studied Arabic and taught English and in Morocco, where he was a youth group leader for American students studying abroad.

Emily Wernsdorfer (York, Pennsylvania) – A graduate of the University of Arkansas with a degree in anthropology, Wernsdorfer has worked three summers as assistant program director at Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center, a retreat facility with a focus on hospitality, sustainability and outreach. She volunteered as a youth ambassador for the Rotary Club in the Czech Republic and served with various youth events at Ferncliff Camp.

Abstract

Adult literacy is a pressing issue within the United States and impacts several other socioeconomic issues. In the United States, 93 million adults function at or below a basic reading level, which is defined as a fifth-grade reading level.¹ In Pulaski and Faulkner counties, about 30,000 cannot read above a fifth grade reading level.² There are several national and state programs that are dedicated to enhancing the literacy skills of the adult population, including Literacy Action of Central Arkansas. This non-profit organization strives to raise awareness about the issue of adult literacy, to give adults options to learn to read, to teach English to non-native speakers, and to prepare adults with low-literacy skills to enter post-secondary training programs. The Literacy Action practicum team developed a plan to raise awareness about adult literacy in the Central Arkansas community in order to engage individuals and organizations in adult literacy and in Literacy Action. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the results of the Literacy Action of Central Arkansas and Clinton School of Public Service practicum team's research project in order to develop a strategic plan to increase community participation in addressing adult illiteracy.

Keywords: adult literacy, attitudes, perceptions, community impact, awareness, engagement, strategic plan, Arkansas, Pulaski, Faulkner

Methodology

Researching existing sources on the issue of adult illiteracy and how it affects the community was the first step in this project. Using this information as a foundation, the team collected primary sources through two focus groups and 59 key stakeholder interviews. The focus groups were comprised of six to ten citizens of Central Arkansas and were facilitated by two group members using a list of questions to provoke general discussion about adult literacy and how to best engage the community with it.

After discussing and analyzing the information collected from the focus groups, the team created a list of interview questions that probed the issue at a deeper level. A list was generated of potential interviewees based on recommendations from Literacy Action and suggestions from the focus group participants. Sectors were strategically identified and individuals within these sectors were contacted to create a broad, diverse network of partners within Faulkner and Pulaski Counties. The stakeholder interviewees have been the initial contact within these sectors. In addition, the individuals have served as a springboard for strengthening connections within these sectors. At the core of solving the issue of adult illiteracy in Faulkner and Pulaski Counties is the need for strong partnerships on a cooperative level. The interviewed stakeholders are well-known, well-connected leaders and represent a variety of fields, including business, business services, government, healthcare, nonprofit, and professional. The team then scheduled and completed sixty interviews with these stakeholders, which were then coded and analyzed to create our project deliverables.

We interviewed 12 non-white (African American and Latino) stakeholders, which underrepresents the non-white population of Central Arkansas. Non-whites represent about 35 percent of the population in Pulaski and Faulkner counties, and only 20 percent of our

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *National assessment of adult literacy (NAAL)*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp

² U.S. Department of education, 2003

interviewees were non-white.³ Having a more diverse interview sample would have given us a wider set of data that would have allowed us to more accurately represent the views and opinions of the Central Arkansas population. Our interview questions were carefully constructed to avoid leading language as much as possible. However, there were a few questions that used leading language, which may have influenced respondents' answers. When creating our strategic communications plan, we discovered several holes in our research and subsequent opportunities for improvement. Our interviews did not investigate engagement strategies within specific sectors. Learning what messages resonate the most within different sectors would have allowed us to create a more effective strategic communications plan.

Results

Attitudes and Perceptions

Semantic Confusion

The conversations surrounding perceptions of low-literate adults varied amongst stakeholders. Some were confused by the apparent interchangeability of the terms “literacy,” “illiteracy,” and “low literacy.” They were unsure which term to use, which made it harder for individuals to talk about and understand the issue.

Negative Perceptions of Low-Literate Adults

Every stakeholder acknowledged that there is at least one stigma, or negative perception, associated with being illiterate or having low-literacy skills. Most realized that these assumptions, founded or unfounded, impact their perceptions of low-literate adults. Fifty-three percent of the stakeholders stated society perceives low-literate adults to be unintelligent, dumb, or stupid. Twenty-five percent of stakeholders believe that adults with low-literacy skills are perceived as being incapable of the basic functions in life such as taking care of themselves and their families, maintaining a job, and participating in the community. Many stakeholders linked adult illiteracy to a lower socioeconomic status; with 32 percent stating that low-literate adults are perceived as being poor. Additionally, about 17 percent of stakeholders perceived low-literate adults to be more likely to participate in criminal activities. Other negative perceptions of low-literate adults cited by stakeholders include that they are lazy, ignorant, or backwards. However, 34 percent of stakeholders believe that a disability or a lack of opportunity contribute to lower literacy skills amongst adults (see Figure 1).

Other Perceptions

Many people discussed the negative stigmas low-literate adults may have about themselves, including a sense of shame, embarrassment, or low self-esteem. Fifty-four percent of stakeholders expressed the view that adults with low-literacy skills feel a sense of embarrassment and shame, and 22 percent believe that low-literate adults experience low self-esteem as a result of their lack of literacy skills. Many stakeholders felt that low-literate adults are more likely to depend on government assistance programs and are less likely to be engaged in civic matters such as politics, church life, community meetings, and overall democratic processes. Additionally, three stakeholders mentioned the importance of reading not only for education, but

³ U.S. Census Bureau (2010, April 1). “State and County QuickFacts: Faulkner County, Arkansas.” Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/05/05045.html>; U.S. Census Bureau (2010, April 1). “State and County QuickFacts: Pulaski County, Arkansas.” Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/05/05119.html>

for pleasure, which provides value-structures and aid in human and emotional development. Most agreed that stigmas severely impede the process of outreach to low-literate adults, as well as potential volunteers and donors, thus creating a negative impact on the community at large.

Figure 1. Perceptions of Low-Literate Adults.

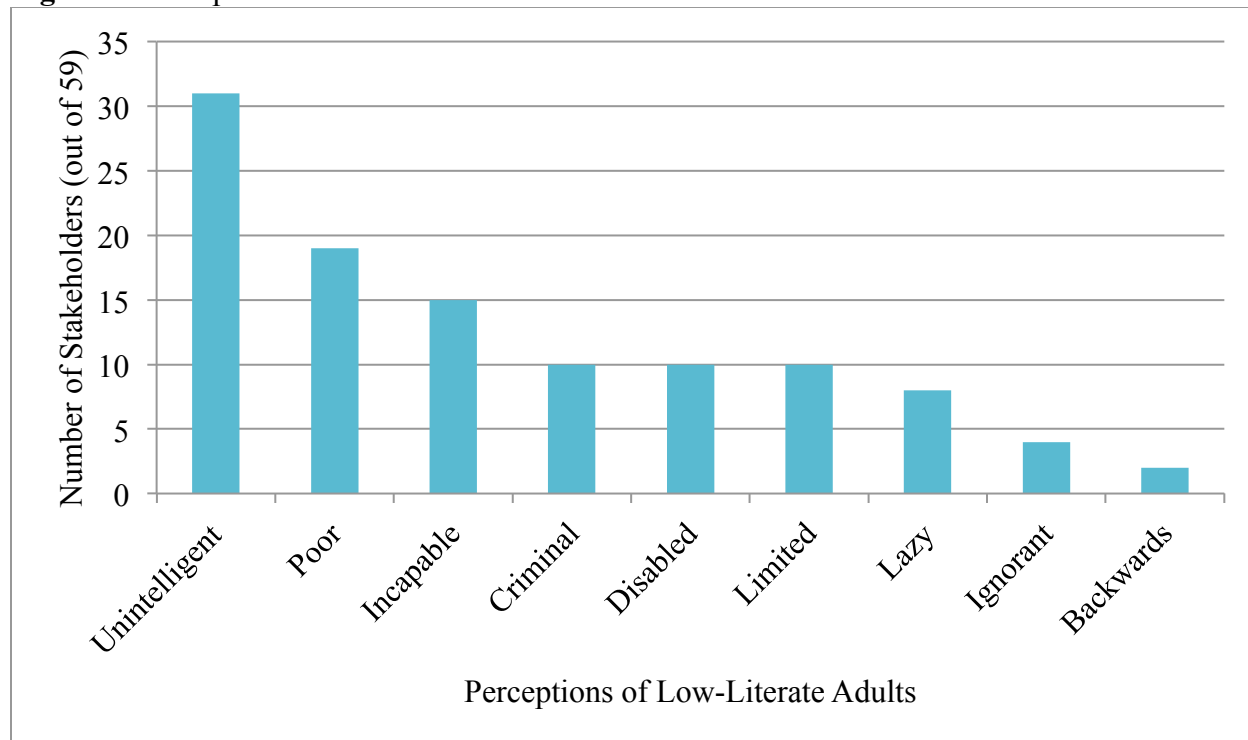


Figure 1. This figure illustrates stakeholder responses to the question “What types of stigmas do you think are associated with people who have low literacy skills or who are illiterate?”

Source: Data collected by LACA Practicum team.

Community Impact

Nearly every stakeholder mentioned a number of socioeconomic issues that are inextricably linked with adult literacy. Eighty-one percent of stakeholders felt that communities would improve if adult literacy rates increased. When asked which three socioeconomic issues are most impacted by adult literacy rates, the top three issues mentioned were employment (mentioned by 80 percent of stakeholders), poverty (mentioned by 73 percent), and early childhood education (mentioned by 49 percent). Other literacy-related issues mentioned by stakeholders were crime, hunger, healthcare, and housing (see Figure 2). Stakeholders mentioned certain issues more often than others, while issues like healthcare were seldom discussed; this indicates many do not realize the links between all socioeconomic issues and adult literacy.

Connection to Employment

The problem of employment was multifaceted; stakeholders stated a variety of interrelated issues concerning the link between literacy and employment in Central Arkansas. For instance, many of those interviewed from the business field cited the importance of literacy in creating an effective and desirable workforce, stating that almost every job today requires at least a basic literacy level, particularly in our increasingly technological world. A significant

number of interviewees from many different backgrounds emphasized the opportunity costs and impaired economic productivity that low literacy imposes on the economy of Central Arkansas; 83 percent of stakeholders felt that literacy rates were “extremely” or “fairly” important to community’s overall economy (see Figure 3). Furthermore, 49 percent of stakeholders expressed concern about Arkansas’ appeal to out-of-state businesses that might consider locating here; without a literate, capable workforce, Arkansas is perceived as an undesirable location for new companies. Respondents in Faulkner County emphasized the importance of literacy rates in direct relation to the community’s diverse economy. They voiced the importance of ensuring the workforce is capable and strong to fill the jobs that locate in the region.

Connection to Early Childhood Education

Another commonly raised issue was that of intergenerational literacy and the link between adult literacy of early childhood education. Seventy-one percent of respondents voiced that adult literacy has a strong impact on the literacy and education of children. Many stakeholders felt that the literacy level of a parent would directly correlate with their children’s literacy levels; indeed, research reveals that the number one determinant of a child’s literacy is his or her mother’s literacy.⁴ Several stakeholders cited adults reading to children, keeping books in the house, and encouraging reading skills early in school as significant and effective ways to increase literacy.

Figure 2. Impact of Adult Literacy on Other Socioeconomic Issues

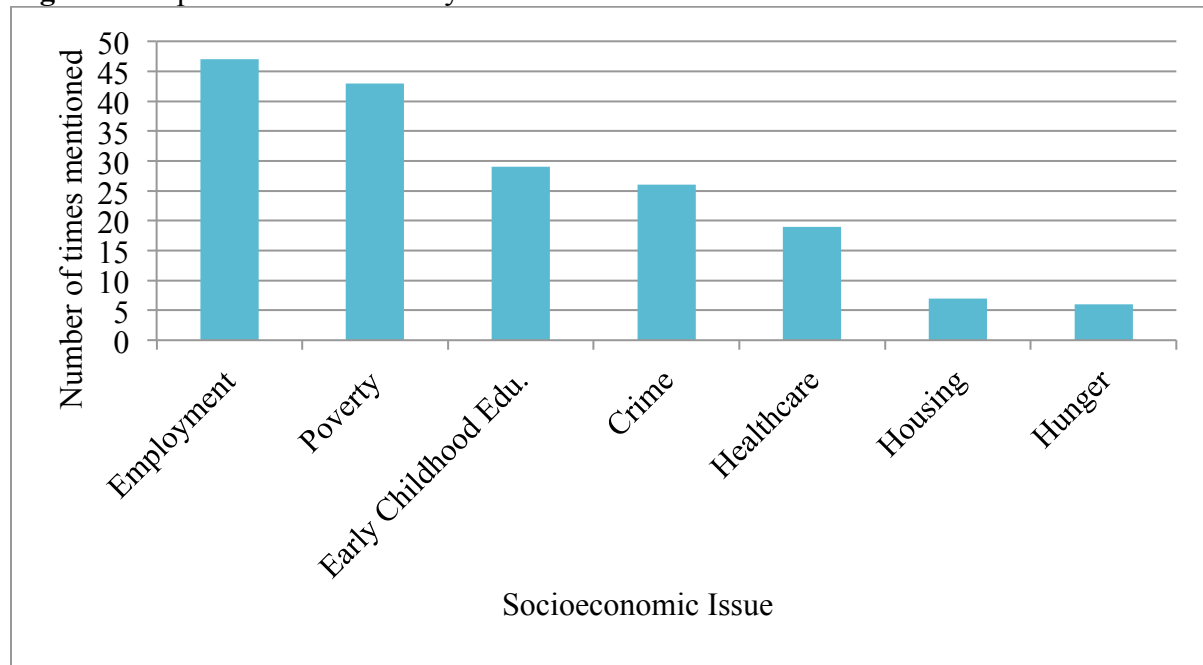


Figure 2. This figure illustrates stakeholder responses to the question “Out of the following socioeconomic problems, which three do you think are most affected by adult illiteracy: housing, hunger, healthcare, crime, early childhood education, employment, and poverty?”

Source: Data collected by LACA Practicum team.

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010). *Quick Guide to Health Literacy*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/quickguide/>

Figure 3. Impact of Adult Literacy on the Economy of Central Arkansas



Figure 3. This figure illustrates stakeholder responses to the question “How important is the effect of adult literacy on the economy of Central Arkansas?”

Source: Data collected by LACA Practicum team.

Awareness

Awareness was a key theme that was repeated throughout the interview process. The majority of stakeholders had some to very little awareness of the issue of adult literacy in Central Arkansas. However, each respondent expressed that access to literacy resources for adults with low-literacy skills was extremely important, demonstrating that a lack of awareness does not imply a lack of concern about the issue (see Figure 4). In addition, the majority of respondents said that literacy was linked to socioeconomic issues that affect the productivity of families and the prosperity of communities. Almost half of the interviewed stakeholders, about 37 percent, said that this lack of awareness was a barrier to their engagement.

Figure 4. Comparison of Awareness Levels to Perceived Importance of Literacy Instruction.

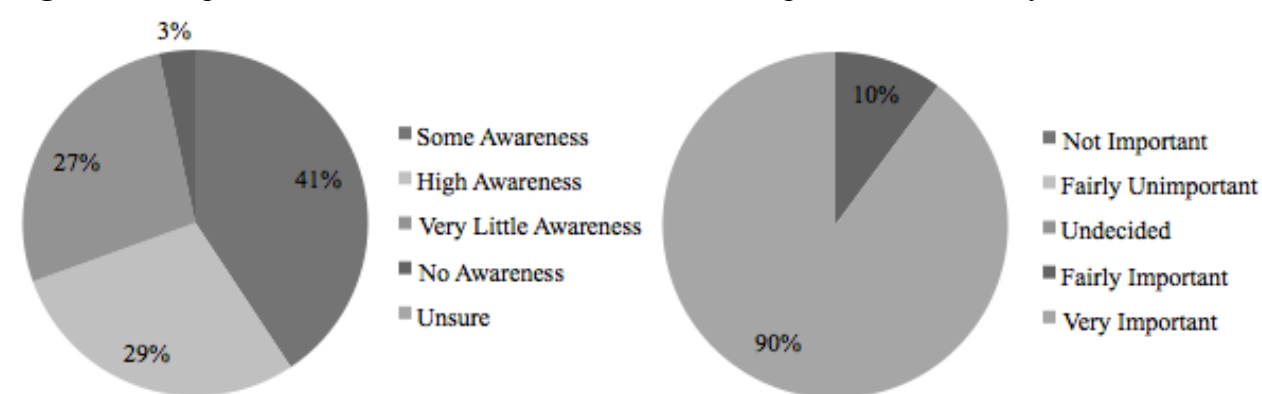


Figure 4. The graph on the left illustrates stakeholder responses to the question “How would you describe your awareness of the issue of adult literacy in U.S. and in Central Arkansas?” The graph on the right illustrates stakeholder responses to the question “How important is it that adults in our community have access to basic literacy instruction?”

Source: Data collected by LACA Practicum team.

Engagement

Barriers to Engagement

Forty-nine percent of respondents expressed that a personal connection is a key factor in deciding whether or not to become engaged in the issue of adult literacy. Thirty-four percent of interviewees said that passion is an important element in deciding which issue to become engaged in. About a third of respondents said that the issue of adult literacy competes for attention, support, and volunteers with other issues that are perceived to be more urgent. Issues such as poverty, hunger, and cancer were examples. Twenty-nine percent of respondents said that competition with other issues deters engagement in issues around adult literacy. Communicating the impacts of low literacy to those without significant experience or personal connections with the issue serves as a major barrier to community engagement.

Motivations for Engagement

Interviewees expressed difficulty in imagining what it would be like to function in today's society without the ability to read and write. Accordingly, 37 percent of interviewees expressed that connecting the issue of adult literacy to personal stories would be helpful in motivating the public to become engaged. In addition to the use of personal stories, the use of statistics was identified as a way to motivate the community to become engaged. Respondents expressed that giving audiences insights into how great the need is and how that need translates into hard numbers would be a powerful strategy. In essence, the statistics serve as qualifiers or motivators of respondents' involvement. About a quarter of respondents, 22 percent, expressed that statistics should be used to motivate individuals and institutions to become engaged with the issue of adult literacy. However, a small number of respondents, about eight percent, said that statistics, if used, may become a barrier to engagement, citing that negative numbers tend to dishearten potential participants and deter them from becoming involved.

Discussion

Attitudes and Perceptions

From the research, the team found that the conversations surrounding low-literate adults have a negative tone. The stigmas stakeholders associated with low-literate adults reinforce stereotypes and inhibit engagement with the issue. It is therefore essential to change the ways people talk about adult literacy in order to illustrate that low-literacy affects people of every race, gender, religion, class, and demographic. Creating a new and positive dialogue around adult literacy could help increase engagement with and awareness of the issue. For example, an organization called Think Differently implemented a three-year initiative to shift attitudes and behaviors towards disabled communities, allowing them to better serve their target population.⁵ It is essential to challenge and deconstruct the present stigmas. Research showed that humanizing the issue and changing the language used to describe the issue will help eliminate the negative perceptions of low literate adults. Additionally, sharing personal stories about low-literate adults may help humanize the issue and illustrate to the community that adult literacy can impact anyone. The team realized that the semantic confusion between "literacy," "illiteracy," and "low literacy" makes it difficult for community members to discuss and address the problem of adult literacy. It is important for Literacy Action to establish uniform terminology in order to make it easier for individuals to discuss and understand the issue.

⁵ Think Differently (2012). About Think Differently. Retrieved from <http://www.thinkdifferently.nz>

Community Impact

The data collected through interviews demonstrates that most community members recognize a link between adult literacy rates and a successful, thriving community. Accordingly, nearly every stakeholder felt that if Central Arkansas improves its adult literacy rates, other problematic areas would improve, such as poverty, employment, hunger, crime, early childhood education, and so on. Decreased unemployment, increased earning potential, and a decreased crime rate were among the most prevalent benefits. Also among the benefits were increased benchmarks in elementary schools and increased graduation rates. Better literacy rates also could attract more capable workers and international businesses. One respondent drew the parallel between improving literacy to not only improving retention rates for employers, but to an investment in community growth.

An important aspect to the interrelation of these socioeconomic issues and adult literacy is that an increase in literacy rates would positively impact those problems, but the same is not necessarily true in the reverse. For instance, bettering adult literacy rates might lead to less crime, but lowering the crime rate would not necessarily lead to more adults who can read. Therefore, adult literacy is a foundation on which a successful community can be built; it is a problem of utmost importance because it directly affects so many socioeconomic issues. This is not to say that the other societal issues mentioned are unimportant or deserve less attention. Rather, it seems the most practical and far-reaching solution would be to address the problem of adult literacy in order to positively impact other issues concurrently.

Furthermore, linking adult literacy with other social problems is useful in engaging the community's interest and support. Many people do not feel compelled to address adult literacy because they do not feel passionate about it, or do not feel a personal connection with the issue. Demonstrating the ties between more relatable social issues, like crime or unemployment, shows community members how the areas they care about will improve if literacy is improved. However, it is also important to demonstrate the ties between adult literacy and issues that were rarely mentioned, such as healthcare, in order to fill in gaps of issue knowledge in the community.

Awareness

Raising awareness is a key component to drawing attention to how adult literacy rates affect communities in Central Arkansas. It is also the first step in engaging individuals and organizations in addressing the issue. Before becoming involved in a cause, it is vital to holistically understand the issue at hand. In order to raise awareness about adult literacy in Central Arkansas, Literacy Action should implement an effective, inclusive awareness campaign. This campaign can utilize a variety of methods in order to reach a wide audience and effectively publicize the message.

An awareness campaign can expand and improve upon Literacy Action's Internet presence, an avenue many stakeholders cited would be successful in publicizing the organization and the issue. Furthermore, Literacy Action can raise awareness through other media outlets, including television and newspapers. Finally, an awareness campaign should also plan to create community events in Central Arkansas.

Engagement

Engaging individuals and institutions in adult literacy is key in getting the community motivated to work toward its future. It is important to engage individuals and entities in order to

establish a sustainable, inclusive conversation about adult literacy. It is the belief that through this diversity, viable, uniquely tailored innovations will arise from within the community. By engaging the different sectors of the community, and by bringing them together around the issue, previously established community assets are highlighted, and the community is invited to create its own sustainable solutions through partnerships. Hopefully, collaboration becomes a natural progression of the community, an innovation of their own doing.

In order to create a broad-based coalition of individuals and institutions in Central Arkansas, awareness, individual involvement, and collaborations must increase. First Literacy Action should influence individuals and organizations to become engaged in the issue. Second, Literacy Action should establish a presence in the community through publicity, including Internet and local media presence. Establishing and hosting community events and fundraisers, would be beneficial to raise awareness.

There are two avenues of involvement in the issue of adult literacy. At the forefront of this effort are strategies to increase and retain volunteers through the application of volunteer retention best practices and to increase and retain donors. At the heart of retaining both volunteers and donors is the concept of reaching across lines of race, religion, class and geography in efforts of to create collective action. Communication efforts should be targeted to illustrate specific benefits for individuals becoming involved. Incentivizing involvement in Literacy Action needs to be a major element in attracting community members.

Collaborations should focus on community institutions and community assets, such as businesses, libraries, schools, chambers of commerce, local courts, city councils, and many more. Again, the concept of reaching across lines of race, religion class and geography in efforts of creating collective action is at the heart of promoting collaborations. In addition, communications should be targeted and should incorporate specific strategies to reach different sectors and industries. For instance, a few stakeholders in the business field suggested illustrating how engaging with Literacy Action would benefit their bottom line. Communications should also illustrate specific benefits for institutions becoming involved. Investigating the establishment of mutually beneficial, value-creating partnerships would be the logical next step in generating engagement.

Future Research

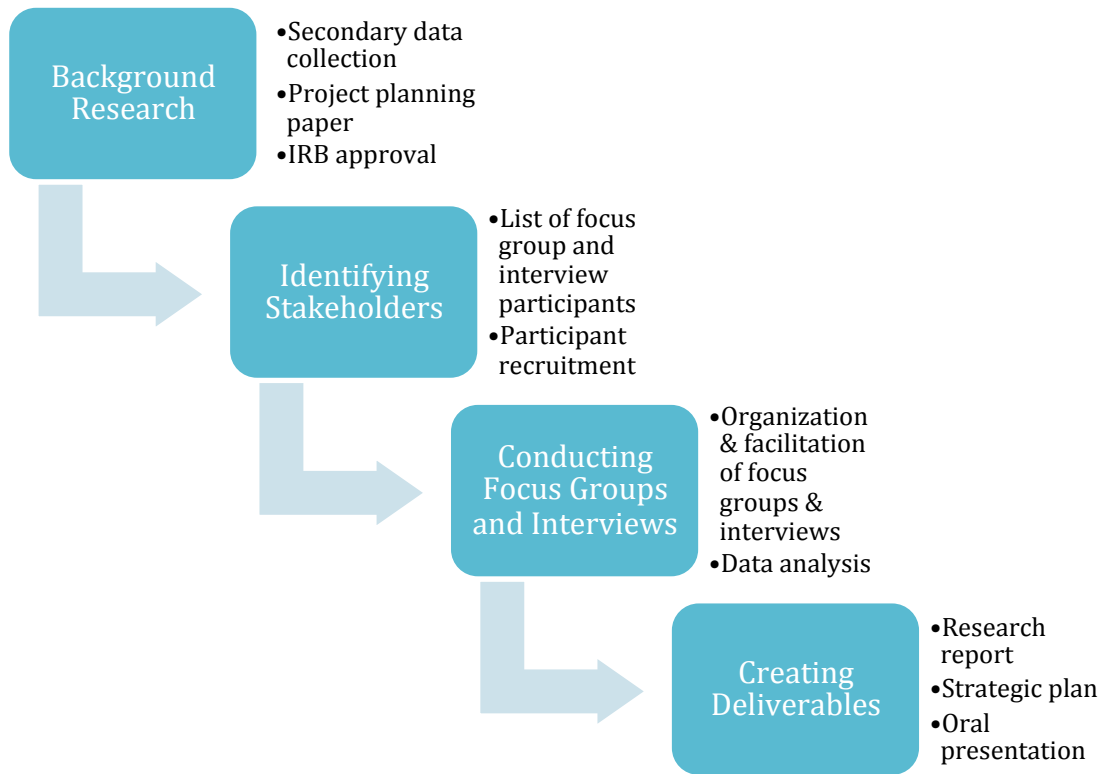
As the work is a strategic plan for Literacy Action rather than an implementation, it sets the stage for further work to be completed. The plan provides guidance on what Literacy Action can do to change negative perceptions, to illustrate the impact adult literacy has on the community, and to determine how best to engage individuals and organizations in the issue. Future research can be done to determine the effectiveness of awareness campaign messages and whether or not explicit statistics about adult literacy increase or discourage public and volunteer engagement. Another future project could be collaboration between local and statewide literacy organizations to create best practices for volunteer and donor recruitment and retention strategies. The team is also providing Literacy Action with a synthesis of the strong ideas that came from the interviews, as well as a list of potential partner organizations. Each of these things creates an opportunity for future research and action.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to measure the attitudes and perceptions of the community and to develop a strategic communications plan to increase individual and organizational participation in Literacy Action of Central Arkansas. Reconstructing how the community talks about the issue of adult literacy and those it affects is at the core of bringing adult literacy to the center stage of community initiatives. The first step in achieving this is to evaluate current attitudes and perceptions surrounding adult literacy and to investigate the impacts they may have on our community. Challenging and eliminating the negative perceptions society has of adults with low-literacy skills will positively impact the current conversations surrounding adult literacy in Central Arkansas. Additionally, it is important to communicate the benefits of improved adult literacy rates in order to gain the support of the community. Linking adult literacy with other socioeconomic issues that the community cares about helps to focus the community's attention on a positive, attainable goal for the future.

Raising awareness is a key component in drawing attention to how adult literacy rates affect Central Arkansas. It is essential to expand and improve Internet presence, and presence in local media outlets in order to increase community awareness of adult literacy, as a component of an overall awareness campaign. Awareness is the first step in increasing engagement with the issue and with Literacy Action, as 42 percent of stakeholders cited that a lack of awareness about adult literacy prevents them from engaging with the issue. In order to increase participation in adult literacy and in Literacy Action, it is important to engage both individuals and organizations. This is key in motivating the community to work toward its future. Collaborating with organizations requires communications that are targeted and incorporate specific strategies based on the type of sector or industry. Increasing individual involvement requires reaching across lines of race, religion, class, and geography. Incentivizing participation in Literacy Action should be a major element in attracting community members to become involved.

Appendix 1 – Project Methodology Flow Chart



Appendix 3 – Stakeholder Distribution

Category	Subset	Number	Total
Professional	Accountants	2	6
	Attorneys	1	
	Engineers, Architects	2	
	Human Resources	1	
Business	Retail	3	6
	Hospitality	1	
	Manufacturing, Construction	2	
	Service, Transportation	0	
Business Services	Banking	4	8
	Media, Advertising	2	
	Technology	0	
	Other	2	
Health Care	Professional	3	11
	Hospitals	4	
	Other	3	
Non-Profit	Unions	0	15
	Chamber of Commerce	2	
	Religious Organizations	4	
	Foundations	1	
	Service Providers	6	
Government	City / County / State	6	11
	Education	5	
	Law Enforcement	0	
	Development and Other	0	
Other	Environment, Conservation	2	2
Total Participants			59