

## Pathways to Digital Skills Development for Latino Workers – Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program and UpSkill America

September 22, 2022

### Description

UpSkill America — an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program — and the Latinos and Society Program at the Aspen Institute, with support from Google.org, launched the Digital Skills and the Latino Workforce research project to better understand the challenges and opportunities that Latino workers and Latino business owners face to succeed in the digital economy. This webinar looks at promising approaches to digital upskilling of Latino workers, students, and households implemented by organizations around the country.

Read the report: [Pathways to digital skills development for Latino workers](#)

For more information and additional resources from this event, visit [as.in/pathways](https://as.in/pathways).

### Speakers



#### **Domenika Lynch**

Executive Director, The Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program

Domenika Lynch is the Executive Director of the [Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program](#) (AILAS), with the mission of empowering Latino communities and promoting long-term economic growth and resiliency. All of AILAS programming is rooted in the goal of increasing recognition that the nation's success depends on Latinos' inclusion at all levels of society.

Over the course of two decades in leadership roles, Lynch has overseen strategic planning, policy advocacy, and public affairs campaigns for nonprofits and corporations, increasing donor and stakeholder support and raising millions of dollars for organizational endowments.

From July 2016 to May 2019, Lynch served as president and CEO of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI), the preeminent Latino leadership institute founded by Hispanic members of Congress in Washington, DC. Building on CHCI's 40-year legacy, she led an organizational and financial turn-around to ensure that CHCI will remain a premier national convener for thought leadership.

She previously spent more than a decade as executive director of the Latino Alumni Association (LAA) at the University of Southern California. During her tenure, LAA doubled its membership and tripled its endowment. Her professional breadth extends into the corporate sector, with previous leadership positions at Bank of America and Univision.

Lynch currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Congressional Management Foundation and serves on Bank of America's National Community Advisory Council which advises the bank on community development, environmental and consumer policy issues. She also serves on the Council on Underserved Communities (CUC) which provides the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) with input, advice and recommendations on strategies to help strengthen competitiveness and sustainability for small businesses in underserved communities.

A graduate of the USC Price School of Public Policy, Lynch holds a master's degree from the USC Rossier School of Education.



**Haley Glover**

Director, UpSkill America

Haley Glover is the director of [UpSkill America](#), an initiative of the Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#).

Prior to joining the Institute in July 2022, Glover was a senior program manager at Amazon, where she led college programming for associates on Amazon's Career Choice team, supporting associates to earn a college degree.

Before January 2022, Glover served as Lumina Foundation's strategy director for state action and equity. In that role, she led Lumina's efforts to mobilize states to support student success and reduce racial disparities in credential attainment.

She holds a bachelor's degree in secondary education, English, and American history from Franklin College in Indiana. She earned a master's in liberal arts from St. John's College Graduate Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and a master's in public administration from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.



**Hector Mujica**

Head of Economic Opportunity for the Americas, Google.org

Hector Mujica leads economic opportunity efforts at Google.org—Google's philanthropy—across the Americas. Within his role, he looks after a \$100M+ grantmaking portfolio that supports interventions which aim to provide pathways to digital economy jobs for individuals with multiple barriers to employment. Hector also serves on Google's Latino Leadership Council, where he helps to steward Google's social impact ventures with the Latino community.

Hector has spent the last decade advancing social justice through philanthropy and public policy. Prior to Google, Hector's experience ranged from investment banking at Oppenheimer & Co, constituent casework at the Office of Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, and diplomatic relations at the Economic Section of the US Embassy in Tokyo.

Hector holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Business from Florida International University, a Professional Certificate in Social Entrepreneurship from the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and a Master of Public Affairs from the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley. Outside of work, Hector co-chairs the Latino Digital Success Task Force at the Aspen Institute, and he serves on the board of directors of Hispanics in Philanthropy, the Hispanic Federation, and several advisory boards, including WorkingNation and Inicio Ventures. Hector currently resides in South Florida.



**Karina Ayala-Bermejo**

President & CEO, Instituto del Progreso Latino

Karina Ayala-Bermejo has nearly 30 years of combined professional experience in multiple areas of leadership, nonprofit management, human resources, and law. She began her career as a hearing officer for the Chicago Board of Education, becoming an assistant general counsel for the Board of Education, and advanced to the highest HR executive position for the City of Chicago, where she worked for three years. Karina spent seven years as the director of community services for the Chicago Bar Association, where she encouraged attorneys to take on pro bono work and collaborated with the bar and various divisions of the Circuit Court of Cook County on initiatives to improve the justice system.

Karina has served as general counsel and executive vice president of Metropolitan Family Services (MFS), one of the oldest nonprofit organizations in Illinois. As general counsel, she was responsible for all legal matters for MFS. She also served as the executive director of the Legal Aid Society of MFS and previously served as vice president of human resources for MFS. She is also a former president of the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois.

Karina is the current president and CEO of Instituto del Progreso Latino. Instituto has evolved into a leading community-based educational organization, providing high-quality innovative programs in workforce development; adult and secondary education; English as a Second Language; immigration and citizenship preparation; and legal aid. Instituto also encompasses two charter high schools: Instituto Justice Leadership Academy and Instituto Health Sciences Career Academy. Under Karina's leadership, the Instituto College of Nursing was launched and recently graduated its first two cohorts of nurses. Karina holds the Instituto mission close to her heart. As an immigrant who has struggled at every level, she is honored to be the mirror and the voice of an institution that helps other immigrants and their families reach their fullest potential. Instituto leads with education because education is power.

Karina is chair of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations New Americans Advisory Council. In 2021, Karina advocated for immigrant communities by standing up for the welcoming city ordinance amendments, hosting naturalization workshops, welcoming Afghan refugees, organizing vaccine outreach, and facilitating distributions of food and personal protective equipment.

Under Karina's leadership, Instituto immediately pivoted at the onset of the pandemic to address food insecurity by partnering with The Greater Chicago Food Depository and was recognized as a Pandemic Hero. With the help of our partners and volunteers, they continue to hold monthly food distributions and to date have fed 12,901 households and 51,076 individuals. Instituto also distributed 300,000 KN95 masks to over 89 community organizations in partnership with the Illinois Partners for Human Services and distributed over 15,000 masks during monthly food distributions.

Instituto in partnership with Illinois Unidos have been instrumental in vaccination efforts to Latinx communities hardest hit by the pandemic. Instituto held one of the city's most successful vaccination

efforts targeted at teens with over 600 vaccinations. They have also helped vaccinate 1,200 individuals and provided crucial vaccine outreach to just under 10,000 individuals.

Instituto helped address housing insecurity by directing \$566,000 of rental assistance into the Latinx immigrant community. Because Karina believes strongly that every child should open a gift on Christmas, Instituto distributed over 2,000 toys during the pandemic for the holiday. She brings a touch of love and passion to all she does.



**James Barry**

Senior Manager of Program Development, 32BJ Training Fund

James Barry is the senior manager of program development at the Local 32BJ Training Fund. He leads the curriculum and professional development teams that design course materials for over 250 industry and academic courses.

The Fund is a joint labor/management partnership between the [Local 32BJ Service Employees International Union](#), which represents 175,000 building service workers, and the [Realty Advisory Board on Labor Relations](#), which represents commercial and residential building employers. The Fund operates over 40 locations in Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington DC, and trains over 10,000 students every year.

James joined the Fund in 2003 and has since worked to secure funding through federal, state, and foundation sources for English as second language, security, disaster preparedness, and infectious diseases courses for building workers. He also founded the Fund's green building programming, which prepares thousands of members for LEED, Building Performance Institute, GPRO, and other certifications and accreditations.

Prior to joining the Fund, James worked for over 10 years in adult education and workforce training organizations, assisting people from low-income and priority populations to re-enter the workforce.

He holds a bachelor's degree from Fairfield University, along with building sustainability and efficiency certifications, and has presented at national conferences sponsored by American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy, Cornell University Global Labor Institute, BlueGreen Alliance, and others.



**A. Pamela Saez**

Director, Student Impact & Outcomes, Austin Community College

Ann Pamela Saez is the director of student impact and outcomes (SI&O) at Austin Community College (ACC). With a passion for driving career development practices that scale equitable outcomes for those facing disproportionate barriers, she leads SI&O in bolstering populations needing social and economic mobility. Prioritizing efficacy research to determine gaps, trends, and high-impact interventions, Pamela helped to develop ACC's college-wide digital fluency initiative now underway. Before her work with SI&O, Pamela was the director of ACC's Digital Skills for Today's Jobs and ACC's Back to Work 50+ program. Pamela provides ongoing support as an Austin lead for the non-governmental organization SMVA. She has been an international grant lead and fundraiser, as well as an educator for the Hariharananda Balashram Orphanage School in

Odisha, India. Currently, Pamela is writing a young adult adventure novel incorporating Vedic science and the teachings of Sanatana Dharma.



**Linda Smarzik**

Dean of Digital Fluency and Innovation, Austin Community College District

Linda Smarzik, dean of digital fluency and innovation at Austin Community College, is standing up a new division that promotes equitable academic and career outcomes by providing microcredentials in digital and professional workforce competencies required by the 21st-century workplace. Previously, Linda held the role of dean of computer science and information technology, leading initiatives such as the Bachelor of Applied Science in Software Development, Women in IT, and the Texas is IT apprenticeship program. Currently, Linda is leading the development of a second Bachelor of Applied Science in Cybersecurity that will launch in fall 2023. Prior to joining ACC, Linda was vice president/creative director for a local advertising and marketing firm. Linda is the author of "The Mind of Thuse," summarizing her years of teaching and research in cognitive neuroscience when applied to the process of creativity.

## Moderators



**Victoria Prince**

Research Associate, Economic Opportunities Program

Victoria Prince is a research associate for the [Economic Opportunities Program's Workforce Strategies Initiative](#). Victoria is interested in public impact research related to increasing economic stability and mobility, particularly among youth and disadvantaged communities. In addition to work on education policy and charter school networks, her prior research experience includes studying how employee benefits, occupational licensing requirements, caregiving responsibilities, and community college programs may impact economic stability and mobility. After attaining a Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy from Duke University in 2018, she taught eighth grade for two years as a Teach for America corps member. Victoria enjoys dancing, binge-watching anime, thrift shopping, and learning about new cultures through food and travel.



**Diego Deleersnyder**

Associate Director for Policy & Research, The Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program

Diego Deleersnyder is the Associate Director for Policy & Research at the [Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program](#). He leads the Latino Digital Inclusion Initiative, which aims at identifying, developing and uplifting promising ecosystem approaches that better prepare Latinos to compete in a 21st century digital economy.

Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Diego brings 9 years of experience in local capacity building, economic development, and urban management projects in the public and not-for-profit sectors in

Latin America, Europe, and the USA. He worked at CIPPEC, one of Latin America's leading think tanks, where he was responsible for the design and implementation of research and technical assistance projects at the local level throughout the region in topics such as the gig economy, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and the coordination of metropolitan policies. He also worked as a program manager in the Argentine federal government, where he led a team aiming at building local governments' capacities for economic development. As part of this role, he created the National Network of Productive Municipalities, a collaborative platform that included over 400 local governments.

In London, Diego worked as a researcher in international development at the UK Parliament, where he also administered the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Mexico. Before joining the Aspen Institute, he worked as a graduate consultant for the Community Development Unit of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, co-leading a team that developed an impact measurement framework to evaluate the racial equity implications of projects and partnerships between community development organizations and capital providers.

Diego holds a Master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University – SIPA, a MSc in Local Economic Development from the London School of Economics (UK), and a MSc in Urban Economics from Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (Argentina). He received a B.A. in Political Science from Universidad de Buenos Aires.

In his free time, Diego enjoys cooking, reading, hiking, and traveling. He speaks Spanish, English, French and Portuguese.

## Transcript

### **Domenika Lynch (00:00:00)**

Welcome, everyone. I'm Domenika Lynch, the executive director of Latinos and Society at the Aspen Institute. I am so delighted that you have chosen to spend the next hour with us for the unveiling of our latest labor of love, a collaboration between two Aspen Institute programs, Latinos and Society and the Economic Opportunities Program's UpSkill America initiative, and the unveiling of the report "Pathways to Digital Skills Development for Latino Workers." It's such an appropriate theme especially during Hispanic Heritage Month where we celebrate the diversity of our nation, the diversity of the Latino community, but also the contributions of Latino Americans.

What makes me so excited about this report is a report that is not meant to just be on your PDF file, but a report that is meant to be put into action. It is culturally competent. It is really a cross-sectional report that really taps into the brain trust in our communities and Latino-led organizations that are doing fantastic work upskilling Latino frontline workers, and also of those most established corporations that are thoughtful about the importance of upskilling their workforce in a way that it meets them where they are in their learning journey.

I want to begin by thanking my colleague, Maureen Conway, for her leadership and thoughtfulness, and really envisioning the way that our programs can work together. It's been a journey of two teams coming together, really leveraging other research that has been done during the pandemic about what the needs are of workers in general and Latino workers in particular. So what you're going to hear today are some evidence-based research, examples of those organizations and the front lines of that change, stories of the way that the Latino community is so resourceful. With limited financial investments, they were able to keep their workers think about digitizing their businesses, and at the same time, thinking through how upskilling their workers during the pandemic would serve them for long-term career growth. So I'm inspired. It is one of the reasons that I joined the Aspen Institute, was really to

come to a place to represent Latinos and be thoughtful about the research and the information that we co-create together.

I want to give you some stats about why it's so important to focus on Latino workers. You've heard many times that were the fastest growing minority group in the country. We're 62 million strong, 18% of the population, and also really driving the growth of the workforce. Six and 10 Latinos are millennials or younger. Half US-born Latinos are younger than 18 years of age. And in fact, the latest US census projected that Latinos will account for 78% of net new workers between 2020 and 2030. We know that during the pandemic, I know that, well, I worked safe at home, many of those essential workers and essential businesses were Latino-owned and Latino workers, and it was through their efforts that I was able to continue to work at home, but being mindful that they also need those opportunities to upscale and to grow because we know that as it stands, Latinos today, 57% of them ages 16 to 64 have low to no digital skills compared to the US average of 31%.

There's a lot of work to do, but what's so exciting about the report is that we don't focus on what's not right, but really at the opportunity with the economy changing, with the nature of work changing. It really allows us to bring together cross-sector leaders to source solutions that are timely and that will work for the community. So I am delighted and grateful and want to thank also Google.org, Hector Mujica for his leadership. It was really a conversation with him, but how do we bring together two different programs at the Aspen Institute, leverage the brain trust, and be thoughtful about a report that, again, is put into action.

I'm delighted to share with all of you that through our program, the Aspen City Learning and Action Lab, that we are creating an opportunity to implement many of the solutions and the strategies that you're going to hear about today. If you want to learn more about that program, go to our website. But the focus has been around entrepreneurship-led economic development, and you have to be holistic when you're thinking about growing the local economy and creating wealth, and that includes upskilling the entrepreneur and the worker as well.

So with that, it is my honor, I'm so excited that you're going to get this opportunity to learn about the report. Please share it. Please follow us. And like I said, we're going to implement many of these solutions as well, and learn along with you of what works in our country. So with that, it is my honor and pleasure to introduce the newest director of UpSkill America, Haley Glover. So over to you, Haley.

### **Haley Glover (00:05:16)**

Oh, thank you so much. I share your excitement, Domenika. We are really glad to have you here today, listening live or listening after the fact, to learn more about this work and to get mobilized to ensure that the public investments we are seeing and we'll see in the future in digital upskilling and skill development are made equitably and with insights from the community. So as mentioned, today you're going to hear from several of the leaders and practitioners that were featured in our recent report. They are very excited to share their insights and experience in developing digital skills, particularly with an equity lens. This publication, as mentioned, is culmination of work between two teams, the Latinos and Society Program and UpSkill America, which is an initiative of the Economic Opportunities Program. Our goal for this work was to better understand the challenges and the opportunities that Latino workers and Latino business owners face in our digital economy, and to identify those promising business practices and partnership opportunities for developing digital skills within Latino workforce.

So our goals for today are pretty ambitious. We want to inspire those of you in attendance and watching in the future to innovate and invest in support of digital upskilling especially for Latino workers who are, as Domenika noted, most at risk of job displacement due to automation and to digitization. We also want to use today as an opportunity to make a clear call for action. In 2021, Congress passed

the Digital Equity Act, which allocates \$2.75 billion for digital inclusion initiatives. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration is still assembling state administrating agencies for the digital equity programs. But now is the time to reach out to your state broadband leader network to get connected. My colleagues are going to post that link in the information below. You all know that state plans, how these plans get developed or how these equity dollars will be spent, will be highly dependent on who is at the table. So we encourage you to take a moment and identify your state office, and let your voices be heard.

We want to take a moment and give our profound thanks to Google.org for supporting this important work and for advancing the goal of creating a future of shared prosperity for all. So please join me in welcoming Hector Mujica, head of economic opportunity for the Americas with Google.org. He's going to give some remarks on the importance of this work and our joint efforts. Thank you, Hector. I'll turn it over to you.

### **Hector Mujica (00:07:45)**

Thank you, Haley. Thank you, Domenika. So, so proud to be here. Like Haley mentioned, my name is Hector Mujica, and I lead economic opportunity efforts across the Americas for Google.org, which is Google's philanthropic arm. Before I begin, first and foremost, I would like to thank the incredible team at the Aspen Latinos and Society and UpSkill America programs. Thank you for your hard work to elevate this critical narrative. This is a topic that is deeply personal to me as a Latino in tech, and is important to Google as a company that strives to create greater equity and acts the opportunity particularly for underserved and marginalized communities. As Domenika and Haley mentioned, we know that technological advancements are changing the requirements of our workforce, and Latino nonprofits engagement workforce training must be responsive to the shifting market demands that best prepare Latino workers for the digital economy.

According to Brookings, nearly two-thirds of all jobs created since 2010 require either a high or medium level of digital skills. Now Latinos make up 18% of the overall US labor market and will account for one out of every two new workers entering the workforce by 2025, but also make up 35% of workers within digital skills, and 20% of those with limited digital skills, and only 8% of all those with STEM jobs. Latinos also hold jobs that are at the highest risk of elimination due to automation of any identity group, at close to 60%. So the forecast is clear. Without digital skills, Latinos will be overrepresented in the groups that are excluded from economic opportunity.

We understand the urgency of this reality at Google.org, which is why we've been working closely with organizations like the Aspen Institute to leverage this moment in time as an opportunity to build a digital economy that is within reach for the Latino community. As such, we've been proud to be a founding supporter of this effort to better understand the challenges and opportunities that different communities in America face to thrive in the digital economy. I also have the fortune and great pleasure to co-share the Aspen taskforce on Latino digital success, which aims to further advance this critical work.

Now shifting to this very exciting and potent panel that we have with us today, we're going to hear from three organizations involved in digital skills development efforts with an equity lens. First is the Austin Community College, ACC, which has been listed as one of the top 25 community colleges for Hispanics. Their digital fluency for today's jobs initiative is a promising approach based on micro potentials that combine both digital skills and soft or life skills training to improve students' employability. We'll also hear from Instituto del Progreso Latino and organizations whose mission is to contribute to the development of Latino immigrants and their families. Their digital literacy program was developed with support from the Latino Digital Accelerator program, an initiative by the Hispanic Federation funded by Google.org to strengthen institutions serving the Latino community with workforce development and digital training programs, both in English and in Spanish.



And lastly, the 32BJ Training Fund, a joint labor management organization that provides education and vocational training to eligible members of the 32BJ. This is a trade union that represents roughly 175,000 building workers. They offer both basic and advanced digital skills programming, focusing on specialized industry specific software platforms and tools to support career advancement for their membership. This is an incredible lineup, and convenings like this are critical to raising awareness of the significance that digital equity has for resilience of both our society and our economy. I'm excited to dive into this session with you all and thrilled about this powerhouse panel, and hope that you'll find it informative. But more than that, I hope that you'll lean into it as a rallying cry as a signal for us to continue to gather our collective voices and determination to ensure that Latinos are equitably included in the digital economy.

Now, please join me in welcoming the moderators for today's conversation, Victoria Prince, research associate at the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, and Diego Deleersnyder, associate director for policy and research at the Aspen Institute Latino and Society Program. Thank you.

**Victoria Prince (00:12:46)**

Thank you so much, Hector, and thank you, Domenika and Haley, for kicking us off today. So as Hector mentioned, my name is Victoria Prince. Again, we're delighted to welcome you to today's conversation on Pathways to Digital Skills Development for Latino Workers. So we have some truly amazing guests joining us today to tackle this topic, and we'll introduce them in just a moment. But before we begin, a quick review of our technology. All attendees are muted, but we still do want to hear from you. We welcome your questions, so please use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to submit and upvote questions. We also encourage you to share your perspective if you have ideas, examples, resources, or experiences related to today's topics. Please share those in the chat. We always appreciate your feedback. Please take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey, which will open in your web browser when you leave the webinar.

We encourage you to tweet about this conversation using the hashtag, #DigitalSkills. And if you have any technical issues during this webinar, please message us in the chat or email us at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org), which is in the chat. The event, of course, is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on the website. And lastly, closed captions are available for this discussion. So please click the "CC" button at the bottom of your screen to activate them. I think that's all for tech. So I'm going to go ahead and pass it over to my colleague, Diego, to introduce himself.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:14:22)**

Thank you so much, Victoria, and thank you, everyone, for joining us today. My name is Diego Deleersnyder, and I am the associate director for policy and research at the Aspen Institute Latinos and Society Program. I'm very excited to be here today with these amazing leaders from different types of organizations working for our communities to make sure that the new job opportunities in the digital economy are available to everyone. With Victoria and some other colleagues in the Aspen Institute, we have been working in this research project since May last year to improve our understanding of the needs and opportunities that Latino workers face in an increasingly digital economy, and especially since the transformation of the economy that the COVID-19 pandemic implied.

We conducted a survey to over 250 workforce organizations and employers around the country to understand the digital skills needs and initiatives across different industries. We also interviewed over 30 workforce organizations and employers that were implementing promising approaches to digital skills development with an equity lens. The three organizations that are joining us today, Austin Community College, 32BJ Training Fund, and Instituto del Progreso Latino, were all featured in our report in the case

studies section. So it's our great pleasure to welcome and introduce our panel today. You can find their bios on our webinar's website.

First of all, I would like to introduce Linda Smarzik, the dean of Digital Fluency and Innovation from the Austin Community College District, together with Pamela Saez, director of Student Impact and Outcomes at the Austin Community College. Welcome, Linda and Pam. Thank you so much for joining us today. We would like to start with both of you. It would be great if you could provide a brief overview of the Austin Community College and its role in workforce development as a Hispanic-serving institution.

**Pam Saez (00:16:13)**

Sure. Hi, everyone. To give you a little background, ACC serves approximately 70,000 students on 11 campuses over a very large district size of approximately the size of the state of New Jersey. We are a designated Hispanic-serving institute with 39% of our student body identifying as Hispanic. Many of whom are first-generation students. Our Hispanic student demographic is also our fastest growing demographic. We provide face-to-face, hybrid, and online education, and we're considered a top Hispanic-serving online college within the state. We've also received the Seal of Excellence certification, and consider it an imperative to scale equitable academic and career outcomes for all of our students, as we all know that increased education coupled with digital workforce skills is a precursor to social and economic mobility. So while the college is involved in multiple workforce initiatives and services, Linda's going to share with you a very quick example of how the computer science and information technology division approached improving Hispanic outcomes within her areas.

**Linda Smarzik (00:17:26)**

Thanks, Pam. So one of the things, as we're talking about digital skills, we recognized pre pandemic, we had a nice grant from the Department of Labor, and with it, it was to rebuild 41 courses into online workforce courses in the area programming, competency-based education. When we started gathering data, we realized quickly that our Latino females, fantastic, did really well, great success rate; our Latino males, 50% with failure rate. So we had to go back to the drawing board and figure that out. We did some surveys. We did some focus groups to find out what was happening. That was the beginning of recognizing that digital skills was so important. There were several initiatives that led to that, but in that, we built out a pilot a couple of summers ago. And in this pilot, we found out there were two females in there who English was the second language, and we found out through this initiative that they dropped out immediately in this new pilot, trying to offer these new digital skills.

So with it, we kept going back to the drawing board, back to the drawing board. We hope you see our story as we progressed through this. But the pilot we did this last summer, this is a success story right here, we had four courses that were built out using these digital skills. Two of the courses were taken by female, English as a second language. And with it, I was asking if she wanted to come back and take the third course. She calls me professor, "Yes, professor. I do. I am at University of Texas. I applied for a new job. I told the person I was applying for a new job with that I was taking these digital skills." She got the job, she got a raise. That's why we do this. That's why we're doing this. We know we're on the right track.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:19:24)**

Excellent. Thank you so much, Pam and Linda, for the brief overview. We'll go deeper in the next few sections. Now I would like to also introduce Karina Ayala-Bermejo. She's the president and CEO of Instituto del Progreso Latino in Chicago, Illinois. Karina, over to you.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:19:41)**

Gracias, Diego. I am so excited to be here with you. I could feel the urgency. We want part of that \$2.7 billion. We want our fair share. I am Karina Ayala-Bermejo. I have the privilege of being the president and CEO of Instituto del Progreso Latino here in Chicago, in the heart of some of the ZIP codes hardest hit with COVID. So we, very similar to Pamela's remarks, we were getting ready for some remote access. So fortunately, Instituto had some hotspots in the works that gave us a bit of a leg up, but we know that the pandemic highlighted what we already knew, some of the inequities that existed.

So to give you a broad view of the Instituto, we are celebrating our 45th anniversary. We are anchored here in Pilsen, where we serve primarily Latino immigrants. Our mission is to ensure that they reach their fullest potential, and we do that through education training and employment. Because we're a social service agency that has two high schools, we have the benefit of 800 high school-aged students that are ready to learn and grow with us. We also have workforce development programs that are specifically in healthcare, manufacturing, and retail. So we are an education hub for the family. Our approach is, we meet students where they're at. So the pandemic offered a unique opportunity to really dive into the digital divide and start attacking in a way that perhaps we wouldn't have had such fierce laser-focused energy and urgency because we have to.

We weren't going to allow our students to stay behind. We weren't going to allow our abuelitas and abuelitos that learn with us ESL, and the track to citizenship requires the ability to continue learning and have access. So we immediately learned that we had to meet where they're at. Right? Do you have a device that you can learn with us? Nope. Let's get you those devices. So I would be remiss if I didn't thank Hector Mujica and Google for their partnership in our digital accelerator program and Hispanic Federation, and all of the partners that have helped us ensure that we didn't lose our participants. We serve over 6,000 families, so it was urgent for us in an area that was hardest hit to keep the connectivity, to keep the learning, and to keep the access to our participants. So I'm honored to be here, Diego.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:22:24)**

Excellent, thank you so much, Karina. Yeah, Instituto del Progreso Latino is a great success story. We are excited to hear more about it in the next couple of minutes. And then it's my pleasure to introduce James Barry. He's the senior manager of Program Development at 32BJ Training Fund. Welcome, James.

**James Barry (00:22:43)**

Thank you, Diego. I could tell you a little bit about the 32BJ Training Fund. If you have not heard of it, it's a union that represents 175,000 members along the East Coast, and about a little over 50% of that membership is Latino. While many of the members do come to us for basic skills that they would use on their jobs, such as heating, electricity, plumbing, we also do a lot of work with members who are trying to learn English. So I'd say most of the population is an immigrant population. And some people have limited skills, language skills in their own languages as far as writing, so we work with them on English skills and also more and more computer literacy.

The building industry is just becoming very heavily automated. And if you're working in a commercial building or a residential building, you really need to interact with a variety of systems. There are systems that people use to communicate with tenants. The members would have to track packages. They have to track keys for different people, work tickets. So there's all sorts of interactions. It's definitely something that's been revealed that there are still parts of the membership. Although some are very experienced and do things like using building management systems and some even used AutoCAD, there's other people that we're working to try to help them use a PC. There's people that don't have a smartphone. So there's this really wide range, and we want to make sure that everyone's in a position to excel and to

do better at their jobs. And also, you really need computer literacy just to really do anything in your life at this point.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:24:46)**

Excellent. Thank you so much, James. We invite all the panelists to keep their cameras on now as we engage in the panel conversation. We can start perhaps with Austin Community College, just to provide a brief overview on how the digital fluency for today's job initiative was developed and what are the main elements that are part of the initiative. I know that Linda and Pam, you have a brief presentation to share with us. So please go ahead.

**Pam Saez (00:25:17)**

Sure. So the way our digital fluency initiative actually evolved was that ACC received a federal grant called the Back to Work 50+ grant. It was actually provided by the Social Innovation Fund and AARP Foundation. It was part of the Women's Economic Stability Initiative, which was attached to a federal impact study because research was showing that women in the United States were sliding into poverty after the age of 60 due to major life transitions such as the death of a spouse. And because we know women tend to be the major caretakers in society, they often experience extended work gaps. So ACC was tasked with providing digital job search training to help primarily women return to the workforce. However, what the program highlighted was a digital skills gap for 75% of our participants, of which 40% were Hispanic.

Now, you can imagine if you've been out of the workforce for even six months these days, there's so much technological change and disruption that even that length of time can create stress. But if you've been out of the workforce for a number of years and you're required to now use LinkedIn and indeed and other job search engines, requiring the use of filters to optimize your job search, and you absolutely have to get your resume through an applicant tracking system, so it requires the use of applications like Jobscan or AI-driven interview practice software applications. And we are talking about a group of a demographic that's used to just being able to hand their resume to somebody and shake their hands. Right? So it was an amazing amount of getting them up to speed, not just with the digital skills to get a job, but then what were the digital skills that we're lacking to hold down the job. So Linda's going to explain some of the ways we were trying to help them within the college.

**Linda Smarzik (00:27:31)**

Okay. You heard me earlier talk about our four courses that we were working on. We're looking at the top digital skills needed by someone to be able to get an entry-level job, and we found out Word, PowerPoint, Excel access, no surprise, web builder, Photoshop, HTML, web analytics. So what we did in working with these, we had pilot one as course, pilot two as a course, and even a third pilot. We went, "We can do better than that." So we developed these micro-credentials, small units of learning, 20 to 26 hours each that a student can take a standalone or that it can go alongside the curriculum with a faculty member. And that the focus of being able to have a Latino feel comfortable, we are embedding Latino digital navigators into each unit with it to recognize these 16 micro-credentials.

They lead to individual badges, they're competency-based education. On top of that, they have somebody who's going to be working with them directly. Each one of them has professional skills, as you can see, that we're embedding. Each leads to a micro certificate. And then finally, each one leads back to, because they started out as four courses, they lead back to credit. And with this, we believe, we are excited, and we feel like we have found a holy grail with this. We are in the middle of launching it. We had our first launch this last summer with fantastic success rates. So to be continued.

**Victoria Prince (00:29:28)**

Sounds great. Thank you so much for sharing, Linda and Pam. I'd also like to pivot to Karina. She's available right now. Okay, great. Just making sure you weren't having technical difficulties. So we'd love to learn more about Instituto's those customized approach to digital skills programming for your nursing students, as well as your high school and community in general. So could you talk a little bit more about that?

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:29:54)**

Certainly. Thank you, Victoria. We have a philosophy that we meet students where they're at. So we have two distinct programs, or actually three. The first that I'll talk about is the digital accelerated program, primarily for the individuals who were already in our learning system. So taking for example those that are in our ESL courses, English as a second language. The age range for those are more elder and generally more Spanish-speaking, they're learning how to speak English with us. So we learned so much from our beautiful abuelitos and abuelitas about simple things, how to use the smartphone, how to connect to Zoom. Are we comfortable with moving to a laptop? And then meeting them where they're at, removing those obstacles, providing the devices. So as we paired up with our basic computer skills, sometimes it's even more basic than that, and attaching that to ESL, we were able to get a continuity of attendance, continuity to the specific contextualized learning that was needed. So if they're learning English because they have a specific purpose in citizenship, we're working towards that contextualized learning.

These were about 45 hours where we had then attached, in addition to the regular ESL coursework, a Saturday that was focused on the digital learning. We learned so much. First, when we launched it, we were doing English flyers. Shame on us. We should have learned that we should have immediately put up bilingual or Spanish flyers, and then really worked to tweak it and learn as we grew. We also learned that the questions that you ask are so specifically important. Not the "Do you have a computer at home?" It's, "Does everyone have a learning device at home?" You can't have one computer for eight folks in a family. You need each individual technology and a device to be able to learn with us. So we tweaked it as we went along. Really proud to share that we have 98 students enrolled now at different levels. We're meeting them where they're at. We just had 65 complete the program. And we're on track for all folks to complete the program because we have wraparound services and we meet them where they're at.

On the nursing side, we're so excited about what we're doing here with our Latino Equity Center. So we have a college of nursing. We graduated our first two cohorts. We're so thrilled that we have an associates degree in nursing that accelerates at no cost to our students. They're learning. We know that navigating the world post-graduation, and a hundred percent of our folks passed the NCLEX and are RNs, that they needed additional skillset. This digital upscaling was so critically important specifically in ATI, which is the advanced testing instruments. It's the platform used in hospitals to be able to be speedy in capturing patient stats and capturing the interactions and conversations between the nurse and the patient.

So we were able with this partnership to be able to add that component, not just the important didactics and the clinicals, but these important digital skillsets that we know are going to make a tremendous difference in their success as our ends. So acquiring those skills before they get into the environment where it becomes overwhelming then to learn. We have 62 students enrolled there, and we are on track to have 62 complete by this next Thursday. So we're so thrilled with the success and being able to adjust to where our students are at. So if they are students that are learning English, that's where we meet them. If we have students that are at our highest level in our college, that we adjust and we tweak the curriculum and offer those digital upskilling opportunities for them as well.

**Victoria Prince (00:34:09)**

Beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing. We love to hear about the approach of meeting people where they are. I think that's fantastic. Let's go ahead and move on to James, or begin with James. Could you tell us a little bit more about your early work in digital inclusion? Because we understand that this is not new for y'all. Could you talk a little bit more about the computer purchase program from the early 2000s and what needs you were addressing and what led your organization as a labor management org to shift to develop and offer digital literacy courses?

**James Barry (00:34:45)**

Sure. I joined in the early 2000s as well, so I kind of coincided with the launch of this program. But one of the things that makes a joint labor management partnership so effective is that both parties, the labor side and the management side, are working together to help the members become more skilled and also to address other aspects that kind of crossed the line between work and just home life. In the early 2000s, it was probably about 50% of households in the US had a personal computer. And as far as the members, it was less than that. So there was really a question of, well, what's going to happen if we don't address this? And a lot of people, they're office cleaners, their janitors, they're not making the kind of money where they could invest in the computer at this point.

So there was a discussion with the management and 32BJ, and they made a partnership with, it was Dell at the time. We were able to put 5,000 computers into the hands of 32BJ members. As part of that program, there was also a training. So people came in, and then they had to do, at that point, it was very short, it was only a three-hour training, how do you turn the computer on, how do you log in, basic troubleshooting. We set up also some wraparound services with help desk, obviously with English, Spanish. We also do Albanian and Polish or main languages. So that was kind of the beginning of our computer program. And then once people brought the computer home, then they started having more interest in, "Okay, what's Windows? What's Word? Let's look at Excel." And it was kind of running parallel with just their jobs. On the job, if you're, let's say, a lead cleaner, you might have to be checking inventory or creating schedules. So it really was coinciding with what they were doing at the job as well.

So we sort of expanded from there to do Word classes, and these were 33-hour classes. It was Word, Excel, PowerPoint. That was not exactly something they needed at the job, most people, but it was close enough that, again, it's kind of a general literacy, same as a language. There are things that you're going to use and for us over to your home life. But we started doing that, and it just kept expanding past there. We've done Google suite classes. So that's obviously a big change for people, and just explaining what's the difference between Word and Docs. It's just funny to think about ways that you could frame these things because it's a lot to take in if you're new to computers.

We moved on to smartphone classes. So we did iPhone classes, Android classes, and then more advanced. So as we were trying to raise the bar for everybody, just general literacy, then there was also people that used building management systems to control HVAC systems in their building to control lighting systems. And that's a very technical type of skillset. So we were able to create a year-long program around that. Also, running a building with a computer is another one that's more advanced. And that really looked at communication, similar to an outlook but just within a building, a thing called BuildingLink.

Another software called Log Check, which involves what members would do or workers would do is, you'd have to walk your building and log different data points. So you'd have to look at what's the temperature of a particular item, or what's the pressure. And then they would input that into a tablet. So that's something that they would use immediately. So that's obviously, from a learning standpoint, a lot easier when someone could just apply it right away. And also AutoCAD. So those are the range of

things that we've... Starting from that initial computer purchase program and then all the way up to where we are now. And then we have some other things that I'd like to talk about later about where we're going in the future.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:39:29)**

Thank you so much, James. Very interesting. This takes me to the next question. And I would like to start with you, Karina. Since what James was sharing with us is the importance of working in all three pillars to digital inclusion, the access to digital devices, the access to high speed internet, and the development of digital skills to use those devices, but then also a lot of other wraparound supports are required in order to ensure the success of these efforts. So I know, Karina, that your approach in Instituto is very holistic and that you provide several different services to participants. We would love to hear more about that.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:40:10)**

Of course. Thank you, Diego, for that really important question. It speaks to the heart of what Instituto does when we meet people where they're at. We're talking about the intake process that we have. So as you become a part of the Instituto family, you have a team. You have a case manager. You have an employment specialist. You have an income specialist. You have the ability to also connect with the many services that we have, including immigration and other. So as part of the intake process, we are triaging what needs are more critical. I often share that it is hard to focus and learn if you're hungry. So immediately, Instituto became a hub for distribution of all different kinds during COVID. Just yesterday, we did our monthly healthy food produce, healthy fruits and vegetables distribution that the community comes to us. And that's how we lead. We lead by addressing the needs that the community tells us they need.

Early on, we did a survey, and our participants told us that. Number one, food, income, and rental support. And then of course, mental health issues that are really important to address. So you can't learn, you can't grow without addressing those basic needs. So that's how we approach it. It is an absolute formula for success with us. When we register a student, we enroll the whole family. And because we're able to offer not just high school education, but education where our roots are in adult education, we really are working with entire families. I think that is our strength, to be able to remove the obstacles. We know that sometimes individuals will need to go off the rim, and we want to encourage them to come back on because our case managers are calling, saying, "Oh, so what happened? I didn't see Ophelia at class tonight. What was the issue?" "Oh, I didn't have gas, or I didn't have public transportation." "Well, here you go. We have a card. Come back and get it."

So it is our responsibility privilege, and we do that with great pride and dignity, to remove the obstacles that our students face so they can come and learn. They can come and thrive. They can come and be successful and reach their dream wherever it may be, nurse, manufacturing, or being the next entrepreneur. So that is our approach. It's been really successful, and it does require the entire Instituto team to be working as one.

**Victoria Prince (00:42:50)**

Great. Thank you so much for that, Karina. Speaking of treating your population with a holistic approach, there's a lot of interest in troubleshooting and IT support in the audience. I see that, Linda and Pam, you've been responding, but I'd like to invite you both, as well as Karina and James, feel free to chime in whenever, to talk a little bit more about how your organizations provide IT support or troubleshooting to make sure that students are successful in your programs.

**Pam Saez (00:43:25)**

So we approach things in much the same way Karina does. Her organization, very holistic, everything from food to mental health, lot of handholding, and involving the entire family as well. We love that. One of the things that we've created are digital navigators, which are tutors on steroids. They are adjunct faculty members. They can even be advanced students. They provide not only emotional support but grading, and they kind of plug in interventions when they see that a student gets into trouble because there's a lot of communication like, "Hey, I see that you missed this. You haven't been plugged into the platform in a week. Is there anything going on that we can help you out with?" So it could be anything from gas cards, you're right, to our food pantry to "I need help getting my car fixed," because those are the kinds of things that are going on. But Linda, do you want to add to that?

**Linda Smarzik (00:44:32)**

Sure. I'm going to pull out. In terms of the IT skillset, of course we have a help desk where a student can call in and say, "I need help with. I can't install this software." Each department is a little bit different. Each department supports that a little bit different. The college supports it as a whole with basic general "Let me see what I can do to help you with this technical problem." And each department does it a little bit differently. In addition, we use Blackboard, and in Blackboard, everybody's supposed to use it, there's a whole area to just get started and this is where you go to get technical support. So it's holistic, and then it's department-driven as well. One of the departments that I work with in the Game Development Department, we have somebody who's a lab person, who very specifically helps the student in terms of IT, "I can't get my software uploaded for Photoshop." So I hope that answers the question, but the college takes that very seriously.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:45:42)**

I would agree with everything you've said, I think having that helpline. At Instituto, we also have the pre and post-class time where our instructors are available. I love the tutor on steroids. We have one of those folks that are called Dean Banks. We also have learned that our Latino community loves the Facebook. They love the Facebook Live, and we've been very successful at pushing out information, especially how-tos and using the chat box to really focus in on what's not working, what's working. So simple things like, how to use a Zoom, and we're doing it through Facebook Live because somehow that is the vehicle that they really feel comfortable with sharing. So that's where we push out a lot of information, and going live ticks on their phone so we have our folks that are watching our Facebook page kind of be alerted so that they can join in.

**James Barry (00:46:37)**

Yeah. We have a... Sorry, go ahead.

**Linda Smarzik (00:46:41)**

I think one last thing, we are also going to open up a Discord where students can talk with each other and people can intervene in that way. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. My apology.



**James Barry (00:46:50)**

Oh, no problem. Yeah. We have a help desk, general kind of help desk, multilingual help desk, but also we've been doing short videos, especially with Zoom, how do you get on Zoom, how to troubleshoot on Zoom. I think that's been helpful for people, and also just partnering a tech person with an instructor. I think I hadn't mentioned, but Cell-Ed is something we've been using where it's a phone-based English and citizenship training. So you don't have to have a smartphone. It's just like texting. But we also have assigned teachers with that to check in if we haven't heard from them in a while and that kind of thing.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:47:34)**

Excellent. My next question, it seems that there is also some interest among the audience around assessments and how to understand where participants are in terms of their digital skills needs and development, so I would like to ask James first since I know that 32BJ Training Fund develops some assessments to understand which would be the best fit for each participant, if you can talk a bit more about that.

**James Barry (00:48:01)**

Sure. Our assessments are generally done a couple different ways. We have some that people come in. We just have them at a computer, and we have kind of a test that they would just take that's an asynchronous test. So we just sit them down in the lab and have them do that. Or there's other forms, like we do a lot of Google forms to test out. And then depending on where the person is, if it's a super basic user, then we would just pair them with a coach. So it really depends if it's more the advanced type, like the running and building class or the building management class, then it's more demonstrating what you know, but the other one is almost like a tutoring/assessment, more like, I guess, a warmer kind of assessment.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:48:59)**

Karina-

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:48:59)**

Can I go next?

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:49:00)**

Yeah, sure.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:49:01)**

At Instituto, we use tape testing, which measures the math, English proficiency to be able to pair someone on a grade level, if you will. So we'd like to get our students to be at least at a sixth grade level proficiency, and then we go from there. So we're starting really, really wherever the student is. Some of them are preliterate, and we make sure that they're learning their alphabets and getting on a track for literacy. So it really just depends on the student's skillsets. And then we ask what's the end goal. If the

end goal is "I want to communicate via FaceTime with my grandchildren because I haven't seen them," that's where we start.

We have different levels of stackable experiences, if you will, then to get to the end goal. Some of them, it is a longer journey. Some of them, it really is to enable the access to the education that they're having here with Instituto, specifically ESL or citizenship. We are able to then track their progress and encourage them on a different, like Pamela has, these beautiful micro-credentials, we have stackable credentials that then lead to a longer term career pathway.

**Linda Smarzik (00:50:15)**

I think for us, this is our quality enhancement plan, and it just officially started September 1st. So in that, we did have a pilot this last summer, but as you know with a quality enhancement plan with your accrediting agency, you have to gather more data than you need for Department of Labor grant. That's all there is to it. So with our assessments, it's everything from direct and indirect formative. There's a pretest in front of each unit, each competency, and they must make it 90%. And then because it's competency-based education, they must make 80% to be able to get their badge. We use AAC&U for the professional competencies, and met back into that. But it's a tremendous amount of data that we are gathering.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:51:06)**

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention that we also do pre and post assessments, and that data is also critically important to then guide next steps.

**Diego Deleersnyder (00:51:16)**

Definitely. It's key to be tracking what is going on and understanding if we are having any impact with the programming available. So I know that we are running out of time, and I would like to allow for some time for the audience to make questions as well. So in closing, I would like to merge two questions. The first part of it would be lessons learned. So in your journey developing these initiatives, what do you wish you knew back then and you know now that could be useful for members of the audience as they work on this topic with their communities? And then what is your vision for your initiative in the next five years? So I don't know if maybe we can start with ACC.

**Linda Smarzik (00:52:01)**

Pam, you want to start?

**Pam Saez (00:52:03)**

I think, Diego, for our vision, we see digital fluency as something that is exploding and accelerating. Everybody needs an expanding digital skillset. So even though we've well researched these 16 micro-credentials in high-demand computer workforce skills, we know these are going to be constantly changing. It's a very dynamic environment. So we'll be revising, we'll be sunseting some, we'll be adding others. So for the future, it's just constantly going to be growing and adding what our students need so that they can procure family sustaining wages and much better because our housing in Austin has just exploded astronomically. So what our students are really struggling with is paying rent and

mortgages and that sort of thing and even staying in district because it's so expensive. So that sort of thing. In terms of the challenges, that's a-

**Linda Smarzik (00:53:02)**

I can take that one, Pam.

**Pam Saez (00:53:03)**

Okay, great.

**Linda Smarzik (00:53:04)**

So lessons learned, I believe one of the most amazing aspects of this is getting the word out because the data shows this, the research shows that this has to happen, but being able, we're so grateful to be able to talk here today, getting the word out, but it's internally too, internally in the college and externally. And building those, it was a question that we had of those partnerships. There has to be strong partnerships internally. How do you transcript what we're doing? How do you then turn around and then student can show that they have these badges? So a lot of internal work and a lot of external work. Because not only is it the piece of digital fluency, but it is the piece that it must be equitable. Period. So that is just talk, talk, talk, and hopefully you can be clear with your story. Of course, we're starting kind of a school from the ground up. That's quite the challenge in and of itself.

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:54:14)**

I'll start with lessons learned and end with vision. We've learned that you must, must, must use an approach that isn't a one-size-fits-all. Every learner is unique. You have to customize it to the learner. We learned very early on that you must also have one-to-one tutoring. You can give someone a fish, but no, show them how to fish, show them how by the one-on-one instruction, and they will be fine for a lifetime. The other critical just gem that we learned is that the devices is so critical. Don't ask them, "Do you have a computer at home?" Ask them, "Do you each have a learning device?" Because what you then learn is, "I can't attend class because my son is on online learning," or, "We have internet issues because we have six individuals learning at home." So really asking the right kinds of questions so that you don't lose the progress in the momentum.

As far as the vision, it would be so critically important to get our fair share of that \$2.7 billion. Isn't that right? We are doing what works. We're having high success rate, high completion rates. We want in the next five years to connect our participants with skills that have the highest income potential. We want to be able to adjust to where those opportunities are and being prepared to feed the pipeline. So we're starting as early as our high school students, and following them throughout so that they can graduate with some credentials, and preparing them for very lucrative careers beyond yes, livable, sustainable wages, but where are those high potential opportunities that we can start looking into. And that's where Instituto wants to be.

**James Barry (00:56:00)**

I think one simple thing that I definitely realized, and this was, I think, around... COVID revealed this when we have to quickly go from in-person classes to remote, is that smartphone literacy isn't computer literacy. There's a lot of people that really know smartphones, but if they have to take a more

advanced course and they have to use the computer, it's like, it's starting from ground zero. So I think that was something we realized. Also, during COVID as well, we have a lot of classes that are on site with cleaners. There was one in particular, it was March, and we were right about to start. It's a 10-hour training, and it's for a lead point for the building, and we had to go remote right away. So we had people using smartphones, and some people didn't have smartphones. They're trying to do assessments, and they're sharing phones. It was just like, it really let us see, "Okay. Maybe I'm not seeing the whole picture here." I'm sort of seeing that the more people that show up who are more engaged and speaking up that they're okay, but it's other people that we're probably clearly missing.

So we're starting a Chromebook program where people who have taken online classes on their phone, people who are calling the help desk and have issues, we're reaching out to them to offer them a Chromebook to take online and remote classes because it definitely seems like that's... You could do a thing, you do it once, so we did a computer purchase program, but it keeps changing and there's always new things to learn and there's always new issues that pop up. And I think that and wifi are the big things that we're trying to address right now.

### **Diego Deleersnyder (00:57:53)**

Excellent. James-

### **Karina Ayala-Bermejo (00:57:56)**

Partnership, partnership, partnership. Shame on me. Partnership for partnership, the funders who fund the work that we do, Hispanic Federation and so many others, Google, Comcast in Chicago. You have to partner to make this all work.

### **Diego Deleersnyder (00:58:11)**

That's definitely the spirit. Thank you, Karina. Before we start with the questions from the audience, I want to briefly clarify, there is a question on the chat about the grant funding that panelists were referring to. This is the Digital Equity Programs. The Digital Equity Act was passed in Congress last year, 2021, allocating \$2.75 billion for digital inclusion initiatives. Now, the state authorities are developing their state digital equity plans. There is a period around a year for them to complete those plans. And that's why it is essential for community-based organizations and local leaders to engage in this process, to make sure that the state plans are considering the needs and aspirations of our communities all around the country. So that's why this webinar is also a platform for a call to action.

So now moving to the questions from the audience, there is a question that has been asked for at least two of you already. And it seems that there is a lot of interest around the ACC 16 micro-credentials and how they flow back to the four courses, and specifically if there is any specific track for small business owners within the initiative. So I don't know Linda, Pam, if you want to reply to that.

### **Linda Smarzik (00:59:25)**

Sure. So what we did is, we had a... There was a story with this. The story began as four courses, and we got a grant for that partnerships. Thank you, Karina. Partnerships. And in this grant, it allowed us to build these four courses using these digital fluency skills and still meet our SACS. I mean, what we need is called WACAM for our state parameters around it. We built these four courses out, but then because the four courses were built, we were able to lift that curriculum up and then take it over and divide it out into these micro-credentials, which is fantastic. And in these micro-credentials, we then contract them

completely back, five go back to the course that we just built out. So that's how it tracks back. And I have the paper works signed, sealed, and delivered. So that is fantastic with that.

In terms of, does it track to a business? The micro-credentials track to 13 credit hours that becomes an occupational skills award, that then tracks up to one of two certificates and degrees, app development, coding, and design or computer user support. In terms of, does it track to a business certificate or degree at this time? It does not, but we totally recognize that as we get through this year and a half of building out these micro-credentials, entrepreneurship is a track that is just screaming at us to build. So we recognize that as well. I hope that answers that.

### **Diego Deleersnyder (01:00:59)**

Thank you, Linda. The next question is from Garrett Matsuda. She was mentioning the challenge of building buy-in from the community in order for these initiatives to be successful, so how to convince folks that it's important to develop digital skills, to adopt some of these new technologies. He mentions that some of the people he's trying to work with mentioned things such as, "Why change? We have always done things this way for decades, and things have been going well so far." So I don't know if maybe, Karina, you want to answer to this question, how to ensure that our communities understand importance of digital skills development and what can be instrumental in order to do so?

### **Karina Ayala-Bermejo (01:01:47)**

Absolutely. Part of it is the success with the first round of folks in cohorts, right? Word of mouth travels so quickly. It is our most successful participants that go bring us other family members. So you want to make sure that those wraparound services are truly working to room obstacles so that there's success. How do you get the first group of folks interested? Well, you have to go out and you have to market. We learned with our flyers that they have to be in Spanish and in English. We know that we have to put them everywhere, not just in our schools, in the corners of our walls, but out in the community.

We've learned how to use Facebook Live very, very well. And we have events that capture the audience of our communities, like our food distributions where we put flyers and information out. So there is no shortage of opportunities where you will see our flyers, whether it's at music festivals and back to school yards or big barbecues, whatever we can do to get it out. And then when you have the students, you have to commit to excellence and quality and ensuring that success because that success will go back into the community and they'll be your best ambassadors.

### **Pam Saez (01:03:04)**

I think I'd like to add one more thing that when Latino families understand, like in Austin, there are a lot of Latino entrepreneurs and they have landscaping businesses and cleaning businesses, but what they don't have are 401(k) plans and health insurance, and all of the social welfare safety net items that really create more stability, like paid time off. So when we talk to our students, we're also bringing in their families and explaining to them that this will provide much more security in the end for you and your families and a higher level of income. And that's why these skills are so important.

### **Victoria Prince (01:03:52)**

Great. Thank you all for that. I also want to point to another question from, I hope I'm saying your name right, Beatrice, Beatrice, but do you recommend any specific kinds of devices, so Chromebooks or PCs

from your experience working with these populations? Are there any insights you'd like to share on specific devices?

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (01:04:16)**

Well, I can share that Chromebooks are pretty inexpensive, especially if you have a large audience in which you need to quickly access those devices. So we did go with Chromebooks for the majority of our high school students. We then focused primarily on laptops for our seniors and our adult learners, that were ready to use those. Those seem to be more user friendly for our adult population.

**James Barry (01:04:45)**

I would just add on the Chromebooks to have a headset and a mouse because the tracking pad is definitely difficult for people who aren't familiar with that. But again, we were looking at that as, in general, just on expense level and then seeing how it goes and hopefully expanding it.

**Linda Smarzik (01:05:03)**

What we're doing at ACC is, we began again through a grant, a lending library of computers. We only have 20 at this moment, but they are PCs. We have several that are out, which are part of the previous digital fluency initiative with a couple of those courses that I was talking about. When you hear the horror stories about what's happening for them with their devices, you're just delighted that you're able to get them these devices. We'd like to build on this and we're going to probably be reaching out to... We have some context here, we're reaching out.

**Pam Saez (01:05:42)**

But the college also offers iPads and other devices besides those 20 for the entire student body.

**Diego Deleersnyder (01:05:52)**

Excellent. Thank you so much for sharing your insights on that. There is another question that I think it's very relevant for both ACC but also Instituto given that Instituto has the high schools and the nursing college. So Luz Gamarra was asking, "Hi, everyone. About digital skills for Latinos, what do you think are the main changes or commitments which are necessary from higher education institutions?"

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (01:06:19)**

That's a great question. Again. I think it's the approach that, especially in higher education, age levels may be very different. Sometimes our adults are putting their education on hold so that their children can get there and then they decide they want to go in. So just understanding that the higher education is an opportunity for all ages and that you are acquiring families that have different kinds of needs and may require social services and support services, like the ones we talked about, those wraparound services that help address where the barriers and the blockages are, and very much be committed to removing those obstacles.

We need to see an increase in the Pell Grants, and we were beginning to see some of that right now. We know that our populations are very high volume. And in going into education, you're going to have

multiple students, you have families with several students in college. I know I'm not the only mom experiencing that where you have several teens that are in college. So you have to make that all affordable. And help understand that city college is a super viable option to be able to make college affordable. I know that the Hispanic-serving institutions need more help. I will make that pitch. And as we continue to think about higher education, also think about the pipeline that connects into it so that our pipeline has the resources it needs to be successful when they get to that higher level education.

**Linda Smarzik (01:07:58)**

Thank you, Karina. The retention, I would add that piece: retention, retention, retention. Because we watch students come in all excited, and then something happens, life happens. For instance, the story I told at the very beginning of the woman, English as a second language, got the job at UT. She was in the janitorial area. And then she was able to get out of this area and move into a different area. She took two of the courses. Again, this is a predecessor to these digital fluency micro-credentials. She took two of the courses. There were two more to take. She enrolled in the third. She dropped out because she was too busy with her new job. So for me, if we can figure out that piece, that will be huge, lots of wraparound services, engagement, and then caring, caring, caring. So that's one of the things that we are doing with the digital navigators, Caring First organization, and make sure everybody contact them.

**Diego Deleersnyder (01:09:04)**

Excellent. So I think we have time for one last question. Do you want to go ahead, Victoria, and then we close it up?

**Victoria Prince (01:09:12)**

Sure. Yes. Thank you so much again for all of your questions and participation. Let's go ahead and close it out with this one last question from Evelyn. So for those of us in the audience who are looking to gather resources and connect them with entrepreneurs and small business owners in the local Latino community, do you have any advice on first steps? Where would you advise people to start in doing this kind of work?

**Karina Ayala-Bermejo (01:09:39)**

Go to your chambers of commerce immediately, get to know who they are, and all of the local businesses that are part of those chambers of commerce. Both in the neighborhoods that you're in and then citywide, statewide, there's chambers of commerce that can help propel and connect those opportunities. I know anytime we try to open up a career pathway, we're working very closely with the chambers of commerce, but we're also working closely with the employers. So they ensure that when we have our graduates and they go through the programs, that they also have jobs. But yes, definitely, I would start there.

**Diego Deleersnyder (01:10:19)**

Excellent. Well, thank you so much to our amazing panelists today. It has been so, so illuminating to hear all of you and learn from your experiences working on this critical topic. We also would like to, once again, call to action to all of you to engage in the process of the digital equity programs. Connect with your state authorities. Make sure your voice are heard, and have a say in what the needs of your communities and aspirations of your communities are in this digital economy.

We invite you all to stay tuned to both Aspen Latinos and Society Program and the Economic Opportunities Program in the Aspen Institute. The programming we will be developing ahead, we will keep on sharing on our mailing list and our website. So please keep an eye open. Additionally, I take the opportunity invite all of you if you're interested to join us for our Latino Business & Entrepreneurship Summit, which is taking place in Washington D.C. on October 18th. We will be featuring two different panels on Latinos in the digital economy, as well as additional presentations from experts and practitioners in entrepreneurial and business support with an lens. So you can join the summit either in person or virtually. We will be sharing the link to the event on the chat. Victoria, all to you.

**Victoria Prince (01:11:42)**

Yeah. Thank you, Diego. I'd also like to invite you to EOP's next event on employee ownership, which will also be in the chat, link to register and learn more will be updated soon. So hope to see you there. We also want to thank Maureen Conway, vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of EOP; Jamie Fall, former director of the UpSkill America initiative within EOP; and Haley Glover, the current director of UpSkill America for their continued vision and leadership in this work. I'd also like to thank all of the EOP team members, including Tony Mastria, Martena Reed, Adrienne Lee, Amy Blair, Mohona Siddique, and everyone who helped with event preparation and production. Kicking over to you, Diego.

**Diego Deleersnyder (01:12:29)**

Sure. We would also like to thank the Latinos and Society team, including our executive director, Domenika Lynch, for her vision around this topic, but also team members such as Silvia Green, Greyson Peltier, and Yesenia Sanchez. We also want to acknowledge Google.org, Hector Mujica in particular, for their support and involvement in this critical issue. Well, thank you so much for everyone who has been posting and sharing on social media using the hashtag #DigitalSkills. It's great to see that the conversation has resonated with all of you. Victoria, do you want to say the last few words?

**Victoria Prince (01:13:05)**

Sure. Yeah. Thank you so much again to the audience for joining and sharing your questions and comments. We encourage you to connect with us but also each other outside of this event. Please do take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey, which will open in your web browser as you leave the webinar. You can also send us an email at [latinosandsociety@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:latinosandsociety@aspeninstitute.org) or [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org) to let us know what you think. We love to hear from you, and we hope you'll join us again. Thank you.

**Diego Deleersnyder (01:13:38)**

Thank you, everyone. Have a great afternoon.