

destination 2027

One month prior to the onset of COVID, we launched Destination 2023, our strategic plan with ambitious goals to guide us through the next three years. While those goals shifted and changed due to the upending of the travel industry during the majority of that time, we were proud to complete the outlined goals and make significant impacts within our region.

The Process

Looking ahead to 2027, we began discussing our next strategic plan, which, given our current funding and organizational structure, must be both realistic and impactful. To aid in the process, ECU hired Whereabout, which creates sustainable destination strategies for organizations across the country.

Over the course of nearly a year, Whereabout engaged in numerous conversations with Jayne and other ECU team members, as well as one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders and partners in the community. A survey was also developed and distributed to individuals and organizations representing a variety of sectors impacted by travel and tourism, including transportation, government, parks and recreation, hotels, non-profits, retail, food and drink, and many more.



The process culminated in Whereabout traveling to Champaign-Urbana, where they presented the results of the conversations and the survey with our Board of Directors and Foundation Board of Trustees. Following the presentation, a two-day strategic planning session took place at the Lake House at Crystal Lake Park, with one part exclusively being conversations between Whereabout and ECU staff,

and the second half including various board members and trustees in engaging in thoughtful exercises that identified our purpose, our core values, position, and our key objectives for the next three years.

The ECU Team will identify metrics and strategies to meet outlined objectives. Stay up-to-date on all that we are doing for Destination 2027 through our regular quarterly reports.

The Results

OUR PURPOSE

We uplift the Champaign-Urbana region by igniting economic impact through visitation, advocacy, and fostering community pride.

CORE VALUES

We believe in:

Brilliance—We bring joy and an innovative mindset to all our work.

Spark—We are tenacious and spirited in our pursuit of impact.

Illumination—We shine an optimistic light on all facets of our community.

POSITION

Experience Champaign Urbana tells the story of the area like no one else can, and nurtures our community through:

- Inspiring marketing that speaks to multi-faceted audiences both at home and afar
- Generating excitement for the community through unwavering support and pursuit of events, conferences, sports, and filmmaking
- Collaborating with like-minded partners who are seeking bright tomorrows for current and future residents, students, and visitors
- Nurturing connections that ensure everyone is welcome to the area

OBJECTIVES

Enhance Our Destination
Foster and Expand Our Partnerships
Amplify Our Stories
Strengthen Our Organization and Team

From Our CEO



Closing out FY24, this fourth quarter has been non-stop! Advocacy efforts on a local, state and federal level were the central focus through the Destinations International CEO Summit in Boston on April 2-4; IL Destinations Association (IDA) Day at the Capitol in Springfield on April 17-18; IDA Spring Meeting in Moline on April 24-25;

Champaign County First in DC on April 28-May 1; and our Amtrak Rail Coalition Day in CU on June 26.

Thank you to Caitlyn Floyd for 6.5 years working on the ECU team. After an extensive search and a shift in some internal duties, we've proudly welcomed Gina Scarpetta and Robert White to our ECU team!

After 12 years, I wrapped up serving on the Illinois Destinations Association Board. This era included Sports Illinois liaison; Secretary, 2nd Vice Chair, 1st Vice Chair, and then Board Chair during the pandemic! I served as past Chair for the last 3 years. Many memorable moments serving alongside some amazing colleagues and liaison with the Illinois Office of Tourism through several leadership changes.

I enjoyed speaking to the Executive Club of CC on June 20 about the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail. I was joined by ECU Board Chair Annie Easterday and ECU Foundation Board Chair Lynne Barnes.



A shout out to Champaign Public Library for hosting our March ECU Board meeting; to Venue CU for hosting our April board meeting; and to Prairie Fruits Farm & Creamery for hosting our ECU & ECU Foundation Board meeting and year-end celebration.

I am grateful for our board leadership, our partners, and our work force as we build bigger tables to foster a place where residents and visitors feel a shared sense of belonging. When we come together to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces, we all win!

Jayne DeLuce

Foundation Update

The ECU Foundation planned and implemented an amazingly successful Toast to Tourism on May 15! (See separate article with details.) This included the premiere of the "Why I Give" video, generating excitement for this community-wide celebration! The ECU Foundation trustees also actively supported the Christie Clinic Illinois Race Weekend, continued Heritage Trail activities, and wrapped up the fiscal year with a joint board meeting at Prairie Fruits Farm & Creamery. The mission of the ECUF continues to support our ability to host events, assist film productions, welcome and attract new residents, and develop the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail. For more information on getting involved with the Foundation, please visit experienceecu.org/foundation.



Toast to Tourism Wrap-Up

The ECU Foundation celebrated a brilliant year of supporting travel and tourism efforts at the annual Toast to Tourism, held May 15 at Carmon's. The event was sponsored by Farnsworth Group, Hickory Point Bank, Kurt Lenschow—State Farm, Sterling Wealth Management, Hamilton Walker's, First Federal Savings Bank of Champaign, First State Bank & Trust, Pear Tree Estate, The News-Gazette, and Surface 51. ECU Board Chair Annie Easterday and ECUF Chair Lynne Barnes shared top highlights from the past year. During the event, we celebrated our Tourism Impact Award Winners: Urbana Boulders, State Farm Center, Ebertfest, The Great Pumpkin Patch, and Uniting Pride. Learn more about our winners by watching their videos on our [YouTube Channel](#).

New ECU Team Members

ECU grew in June, welcoming two new sales team members. Gina



Scarpetta, Director of Sales & Development, was born and raised in CU and spent 16 years working in Chicago before moving back to Champaign in 2019. She's spent most of her career working in marketing and advertising sales. She's a proud University of Illinois grad and loves attending volleyball, football, and men's & women's basketball games. Robert White, Director of Group Sales & Partnerships, is a transplant to CU from a small town in Southern Illinois. He comes to ECU with a professional sales, event management, and parks & recreation background. He's stayed in the area for over 10 years because of the diversity, welcoming atmosphere, and community pride. He is a dad, brother, and friend who lives by faith, is an avid reader, cyclist, and wine and coffee aficionado.





Out & About

Juneteenth & Jettie Rhodes

The ECU team put much effort into sharing information about the Champaign County African American Heritage Trail. They participated in the MTD Juneteenth Block Party on June 14, Juneteenth Celebration at Douglass Park on June 15, and the MLK Jettie Rhodes Day Celebration at King Park on June 22. Despite the hot weather, many people stopped by to learn about the project, grab flyers, coloring sheets, and water bottles, and enter a drawing to win gift cards to CBPB Popcorn Shop, Neil St. Blues, or Wood N' Hog BBQ. In previous years, most visitors were unfamiliar with the Heritage Trail, but this year, many attendees mentioned that they had seen the website, visited Skelton Park, or watched stories about the Trail on the news. It's clear that we're making an impact and people are paying attention.



CCAAHT Updates

On June 7, hundreds of residents, donors, and partners met at Skelton Park to take part in a ribbon cutting celebrating its transformation from an underutilized pocket park to a beautiful space that honors Champaign-Urbana's legacy of African American musicians. Attendees gathered on a new seating wall and berm while speakers—including representatives from ECUF, the Champaign Park District, City of Champaign, Rotary Club of Champaign, Champaign County, and African American Heritage Trail—stood in front of a towering sculpture at the center of the park's plaza. Preston Jackson, the artist who created the sculpture, also attended and shared remarks about his inspiration for the piece, which reflects a variety of instruments and genres associated with African American music. After remarks and cutting the ceremonial ribbon, the crowd was treated to a musical performance by local legend Candy Foster. The Heritage Trail is working to add a structure that will recognize and honor many African American musicians with ties to the Champaign-Urbana area.

In addition to the Skelton Park upgrades, ECU and the Heritage Trail team have worked hard on many other efforts related to this important project. We closed out the fiscal year with 16 large interpretive signs installed throughout Champaign County, contracts signed with four world-class African American muralists, production underway on 16 short videos about topics in local history, and our first test run bus tour completed.

I Engage Panel

The University of Illinois Provost Office held a full day of site visits and panel discussions for faculty across various disciplines on Friday, April 26. Terri represented ECU and the community on a panel discussing the importance of our local parks and programming alongside Sarah Sandquist, Champaign Park District; Tim Bartlett, Urbana Park District; and Kelly White, 40 North. The attendees were particularly interested in the accessibility of the parks and promoting the mental and physical benefits to students and the community.



IEDA Conference

On June 11, Terri participated on a panel discussing talent attraction at the Illinois Economic Development Association Conference. Moderated by Carly McCrory-McKay with the Champaign County EDC and joined by economic development leaders in Bloomington and Peoria, the panel highlighted various programs and tactics used to attract top talent to Central Illinois. Many of the attendees do not currently work with their DMO on these efforts and numerous questions were asked on how to build and leverage those relationships.

Grand Illinois Bike Tour

ECU hosted a welcoming rest stop for the Ride Illinois' Grand Illinois Bike Tour group after their 52-mile bike ride on June 12. Approximately 150 riders enjoyed live music, bike support, and snacks on the grounds of Curtis Orchard. This group stayed two nights in Champaign and received helpful suggestions on their ECU-provided custom webpage about short bike tours, dining options, and other useful cyclist-specific information. We received great feedback about the wonderful facilities and warm welcome. "You were over the top and will now be known for the Cheese stop and live music!"



Film Workshop Series

ECU continued the local film workshop series with the May workshop, "So You Wanna Be a Film Vendor." This event, held at Analog Wine Library, allowed local vendors to interact with filmmakers about the ins and outs of providing services for upcoming film projects. Vendors in attendance included local restaurants and stores, consultants, audio engineers, and teleprompting services. ECU has used vendor information gathered at this event to create a database of vendors interested in being part of the film industry. Our next workshop will be held in late summer and will focus on recruiting artists who are interested in licensing their artwork to be featured in films.



Sales & Marketing Efforts

Illinois Race Weekend

The Christie Clinic Illinois Race Weekend was a success, featuring the return of the full marathon. More than 12,000 runners took part in a range of events including the full marathon, half marathon, wheelchair half marathon, 10K, Green St Mile, and youth fun run, with the 5K rescheduled in June. The 27th Mile Celebration, organized by ECU, featured eight local food trucks, Riggs Beer Company, a stretching zone by Christie Clinic, and live music. We also promoted the Wooden Nickel program, encouraging attendees to make use of discounts at local stores and restaurants. Additionally, local hotels teamed up with ECU to offer discounted room rates to the runners.



Sports Huddle Wrap Up

Mark attended the annual Sports Illinois Huddle, which was held at the Wintrust Sports Complex in Bedford Park from May 13-15. Seventeen sports rights holders were in attendance, and the format allowed for all 19 Illinois destinations to meet with every rights holder. In addition to these one-on-one meetings, participants enjoyed networking at a Chicago White Sox game and the sports complex arcade. Post-event conversations are ongoing between ECU and rights holders such as the National Softball Association, Professional Pickleball Association, and Illinois Ultimate Frisbee.

Sports ETA Wrap Up

Mark attended the annual SportsETA symposium in Portland at the end of April, which brought together numerous sports rights holders and destination representatives from across the country. ECU had the opportunity to meet with 21 rights holders during the trade show portion of the symposium. The week also included additional networking events such as an opening night party at Providence Park soccer stadium, educational sessions about sports partnerships, and a special Sports Illinois night with Illinois destinations and interested rights holders. Ongoing discussions are taking place between ECU and rights holders, including Rise Productions, Ripken Baseball, and Spartan Race.



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Circle Wisconsin

Caitlyn attended the Midwest Marketplace in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin from April 14-16. This event is the premier group tour tradeshow, and it saw a record number of 18 Illinois DMOs in attendance. Caitlyn had 20 appointments with tour operators looking to do business in the Midwest. Illinois sponsored the dinner, during which ECU hosted a table with a Champaign-Urbana theme. Additionally, Caitlyn used our sponsorship to secure a table for Hardy's Reindeer Ranch allowing them to also host a table. Many valuable connections were established, and we expect to see increased business for our area.

Occupancy Rate

Reporting March-May 2024

Champaign County	54.5%
Bloomington	61.2%
Peoria	54.7%
Springfield/Decatur	59.5%

Average Daily Rate

Reporting March-May 2024

Champaign County	\$120.97
Bloomington	\$110.47
Peoria	\$115.55
Springfield/Decatur	\$105.26

This data is collected and reported by STR®.

SPORTS, EVENTS, & FILM

8 leads	6 tentative	2 definite
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7,700
estimated room nights

CONFERENCES

8 leads	2 tentative	6 definite
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3,492
estimated room nights

GROUP TOUR

1 leads	0 tentative	1 definite
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LEAD: Potential business distributed to hotels

TENTATIVE LEAD: Potential business, no commitment yet

DEFINITE LEAD: Business secured





Hospitality Summit

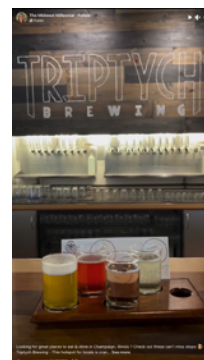
Tim teamed up with the University of Illinois Conference & Event Services, the I Hotel, and the Hilton Garden Inn for an expo booth at the Hospitality & Tourism Summit on April 30 at Navy Pier. The group went all out with University of Illinois branding and captured the attention of alumni, former residents, planners, influencers, and businesses interested in making their mark in a college town. Attendees had fun taking photos with a cutout of the Alma Mater and posting them on social media for the chance to win a trip to CU! Prior to the Expo, Terri spoke on a panel specific to why planners should choose Champaign-Urbana, highlighting University amenities and the many opportunities for engagement in the community.

Data—Impact of April & May Events

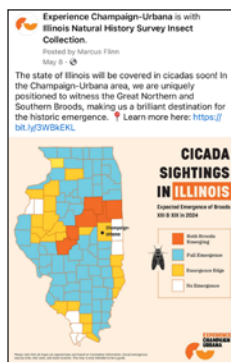
Evaluating visitor behavior and spending continues to be integral to better understanding who is visiting and how to market to them. Major events in the community are significant drivers of visitor traffic, and understanding how those patterns change helps us plan for the future and allow our local businesses insights into what they may expect. Terri took a deep dive into how all of April's major events (Mom's Weekend, Boneyard Arts Festival, Ebertfest, and the Illinois Race Weekend) and May's Illinois Commencement affected spending in various sectors and how it impacted the communities surrounding Champaign-Urbana compared to the previous four weeks. Of note, the following communities saw a significant increase in visitor traffic in April, including Mahomet (27%), Paxton (12%), and Piatt County (11%). Also, in that month, spending on nightlife increased by 16.6%, attractions by 16.1%, and accommodations by 13.8%. During Illinois Commencement, spending at accommodations increased by 25.1%, gas & service stations by 23.8%, and food by 8%. Looking further into that weekend's food sector, **sit-down restaurant spending increased by 48.2%**. This increased spending boosts our visitor economy, supports jobs in the region, and brings critical tax dollars to be invested in our community.

Midwest Millennial Visit

In 2022, Terri attended the Midwest Travel Network conference, where she met dozens of content creators eager to discover and promote the Midwest. Through maintaining those relationships, we were able to host Nicole Kringstad of The Midwest Millennial in early June. Nicole focuses on dining experiences and visited Triptych Brewing, Punch!, Hopscotch Bakery, and Sticky Rice. She also made stops at Allerton Park & Retreat Center, Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, and Meadowbrook Park. She shared her experiences live on North Dakota Today, and will have a feature on her website this month.



Social Media & Web Stats



Facebook

Cicadas in CU
39,860 reach
257 reactions
79 shares

11,940

Followers

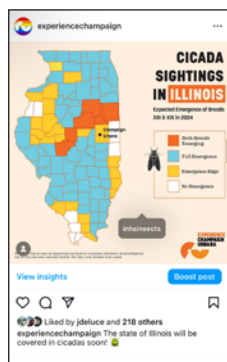


X/Twitter

Cicadas in CU
559 views
35 engagements

6,189

Followers

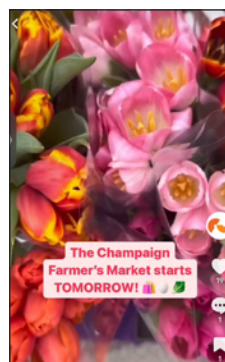


Instagram

Cicadas in CU
4,764 views
219 likes
151 shares

8,753

Followers



TikTok

Champaign Farmers Market
930 views
19 likes

1,843

Followers

WEBSITE REPORT

74,809 Page Views
12,353 Scrolls to End of Page
3,428 Clicks on Page
27,011 Total Users
12,681 Users via Organic Search

TOP VISITED PAGES

Calendar of Events
Our Stories
Food & Drink
Outdoors
Music & Entertainment

83.1%

of website traffic is from outside the greater Champaign-Urbana area

42%

is from outside of Illinois
Top States: Indiana, Missouri, Texas



OUR MISSION

We promote a welcoming destination experience for visitors to strengthen economic opportunity and enhance the lives of residents.

Partners

DESTINATION FOUNDER

Illinois Office of Tourism // City of Champaign
University of Illinois // Rotary Club of Champaign
Champaign County // City of Urbana

DESTINATION LEADER

Busey // Carle

DESTINATION BUILDER

OSF Healthcare // Village of Rantoul
Village of Savoy // Spherion // Ameren
Community Foundation of East Central Illinois
University of Illinois Community Credit Union
Jane Hays & Dave Downey // John & Bonnie Dauer

DESTINATION BACKER

Illinois American Water // John Blackburn // D&V Farms
First State Bank // Gies College of Business
Roberta Gordon // I Hotel & Illinois Conference Center
Parkland College // Habeeb Habeeb // Champaign-Urbana
Public Health District // William Shiner // Homer Historical
Society // Copper Creek Church // Urbana Park District
Champaign Asphalt // Village of Mahomet // City of Tuscola
Hilton Garden Inn // Family of Eugene & Hester Suggs
Fairfield Suites // Courtyard by Marriott // Janet & Doug
Nelson // Home2 Suites // Village of St. Joseph // Homewood
Suites // Lynne & Dick Barnes // Curt & Jo Anderson
Max & Betsy Mitchell // Barbara Suggs Mason // Robeson
Family Benefit Fund // Steve Horve // News-Gazette

REGIONAL PARTNERS

Amish Country of Illinois
Monticello Chamber of Commerce
City of Paxton

For information on our Destination Partner Program and
how you can support our mission visit:

experiencecu.org/partners



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Sam Santhanam, I Hotel & Illinois Conference Center
Charles Smith, Village of Rantoul
Joan Walls, City of Champaign
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Experience Champaign-Urbana Team

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Jayne DeLuce, President & CEO
Terri Reifsteck, Vice President of Marketing & Community Engagement
Gina Scarpetta, Director of Sales & Development
Robert White, Director of Group Sales & Partnerships
Mark Brown, Director of Event Services & Film
Marcus Flinn, Communications Manager
Tim Oravec, Community Development Manager
Jan Troutt, Director of Administration
Estella Samii, Visitor Experience Coordinator
Leslie Lundy, Finance Manager (contracted)



2023-2024

Experience Champaign-Urbana
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Max Mitchell, ReMax
Katie Miller, Busey
Susan Muirhead, University of Illinois Brand
Hub
Lowa Mwilambwe, University of Illinois
Student Affairs
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