

# Closing the Upward Mobility Gap

A new study confirms how people earning low wages significantly accelerate their advancement toward new careers and financial stability through LISC's Bridges to Career Opportunities program. A partnership that teams participants with community organizations and local employers, Bridges succeeds by bundling basic skills and vocational training in high-demand industries along with financial coaching, career coaching, and access to income supports.



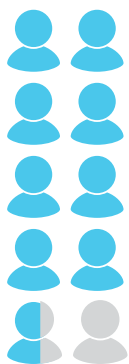
LISC



People earning low wages face formidable – even overwhelming – obstacles as they embark on new career paths. How well equipped they are to surmount these challenges can determine their future success in earning a living wage, securing firm economic footing, and building wealth.

A new study highlights the success of underemployed and unemployed individuals who participate in LISC’s multifaceted Bridges to Career Opportunities program (Bridges). Bridges combines adult education classes contextualized for specific industries with one-on-one coaching to comprehensively address what adult learners need to successfully (1) enroll in ladder vocational training; (2) devote time and focus to their studies; (3) find meaningful employment at a living wage; and (4) solidify personal and household finances to build assets, secure credit, and fully profit from future opportunities to build wealth.

## Key Takeaways



Nearly 9 out of every 10 Bridges participants (86%) completed the basic or career contextualized courses they took.

The study, conducted by the research firm Abt Associates and funded by the Social Innovation Fund, a federal grant program of AmeriCorps (formerly the Corporation for National and Community Service), underscores how Bridges participants completed impressive accomplishments in a relatively short period of time, during the 14 months that data was collected:

- Nearly 9 out of every 10 Bridges participants (86%) completed the basic or career contextualized courses they took; 80% of those who completed courses also earned credentials in post-secondary education as well as career-specific credentials in fields such as healthcare, child development, manufacturing, and hospitality. Examples of the latter include certified nursing assistant, medical assistant, and welding credentials.
- Roughly 60% of the Bridges graduates either found new employment or advanced in their career. The data collected included Bridges participants who won promotion to a higher-paid position or a post with greater responsibilities.
- Bridges participants improved their reading skills markedly – a full grade level on average – typically in just three to six months.

More on the study appears below.



# The Challenge for Job Seekers

For individuals who have been living on low-wage or unstable employment with limited chance of advancement, the road to new, rewarding careers and economic stability can feel steep. On a societal level, there are external forces such as racism to contend with that limit hiring, education, and advancement. At home, meanwhile, progress requires a balancing act between imperatives such as paying rent and buying food on the one hand and finding dependable childcare on the other. As a result, the push forward often seems constrained to small steps, and even then threatened by a chronic shortage of time and money.

## Two-Tiered Approach:

### **Bridges Expands Upon the LISC Network of Financial Opportunity Center® Sites**

LISC has launched two initiatives to support people earning low wages on steadier, more equitable economic footing as they map out future careers. Our aim: to create opportunities for participants to achieve their goals, break through limitations and gain the knowledge they will need for continued success.

We began by developing the **Financial Opportunity Center® (FOC)** model, through which community-based organizations deliver an integrated set of employment coaching, financial coaching and access to income-support services in a trusted, convenient, and accessible setting. Over the last 15-plus years, LISC has expanded the FOC network to over 100 locations in 30 metropolitan and rural areas across the country.

A 2016 [study by Mobility](#) found that FOCs made a considerable and measurable impact - and held still greater potential going forward. Two years after entering an FOC program, the number of participants who secured year-round employment rose a full 21 percentage points; on average participants reported a \$2,000 increase in annual earnings. FOCs also helped enrollees increase credit scores with over half achieving a prime score of over 620. The study attributed much of the impact of FOCs to the community organizations where they were housed: trusted local organizations with a track record of quality service. At the same time, we at LISC saw an opening for enhancements that would not only expand upon FOCs, but also increase the number of people actively enrolled long-term in the services our network offers.

LISC's **Bridges to Career Opportunities (Bridges)** initiative was created to amplify the successes of the FOC model and open the pathway to upward mobility to a greater number of adult learners. We conceived the new initiative as an onramp to vocational training, one that provides supplemental industry-relevant basic skills education, career planning services, and in time, graduated occupational skills training.

The close relationships between organizations that operate the FOC model and their home base communities were an equally important consideration. Bridges relies on partner community development organizations to serve in the role of on-the-ground liaisons both with local employers and industry partners. This enables Bridges sites to adopt a flexible curriculum and offer classes

targeting the strongest, fastest growing economic sectors in the cities, towns, and regions where FOCs operate. The Bridges model also calls on community development groups to build ties with local employers to participate as curriculum advisors, instructors, and partners.

By coupling a curriculum that focuses on skills and career pathways with the FOCs' menu of services, Bridges addresses four key needs:

**1 Lifting educational basic skills as preparation for career-specific training.** A first hurdle to clear is qualification for career-focused training. Often, job seekers need to elevate basic reading and math skills to be eligible for vocational training in growing fields such as healthcare and construction, whether that training is at FOCs, local community colleges or other institutions. Once they have basic workplace credentials in hand, the next task is completing laddered, career-specific training to move from entry-level jobs to better-paid, higher-level positions.

**2 Searching for and landing employment at a living wage.** Bridges links directly to the employment services FOCs offer. Participants work with coaches to formulate career plans and map out steps toward completion of the education and training they will need, conduct job searches, complete applications, and practice job interview skills.

**3 Taking advantage of public and private support.** Covering expenses and caring for families can present a barrier that distracts Bridges participants or makes it difficult to stay enrolled and complete their course of study. FOCs provide support by helping students identify and apply for public and private benefits – supplemental income, childcare, or nutritional support – that can help them cover expenses and stay on track.

**4 Strengthening personal finance and wealth-building skills.** It takes work to translate wage gains into longer-term financial wellbeing. Through FOCs, Bridges provides one-on-one financial coaching anchored to an established, client-driven model. Job-seekers actively learn ‘hands-on’ how they can budget, reduce debt, increase savings, and access credit under more favorable terms. Together, these important steps help our graduates build assets – and save for a home, a car, or additional education for themselves and their families.

As of this writing, there are 40 Bridges programs housed by FOCs located in 19 metropolitan areas across the U.S.

***Type of Credentials Earned by Treatment Group***

**Bridges participants who were tracked by the study obtained a wide variety of career credentials in high-demand fields.**

CREDENTIAL TYPE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Healthcare	418	56.9%
Child Development	64	8.7%
NIMS - Manufacturing	42	5.7%
Hospitality	35	4.8%
Business Technology	23	3.1%
Educational degree	122	16.6%
Ancillary certificates and licenses	31	4.2%

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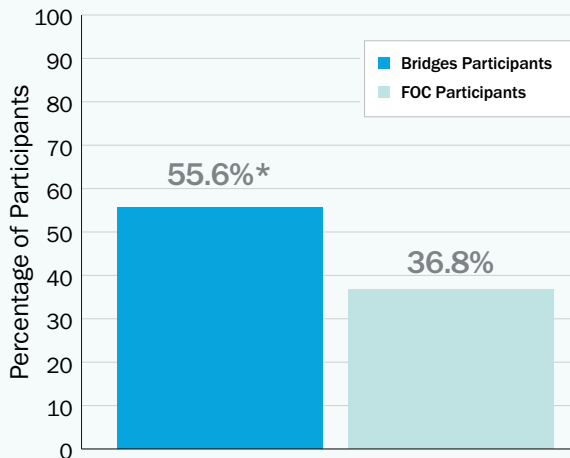
**SOURCE:** BCO administrative data in Salesforce: FFT™ Education/Training Record.

# The Study

Abt Associates conducted its study of Bridges and FOCs between 2016 and 2019 in part to compare the impact of both programs on the success of participants. More specifically, the study sought to examine closely whether the Bridges model of additional training significantly improved the employment prospects and financial stability of clients in comparison to the outcomes of people who worked with FOCs alone.

Research was conducted with the help of LISC, partner community-based organizations, and both Bridges and FOC participants. A total of 13 sites across the country were chosen for the study: Seven with Bridges programs linked to FOC services and for comparison, a control group of six without Bridges. Sites were selected in cities with similar job markets and at community development organizations with similar demographic characteristics. Additionally, Abt strove to match inputs such as the Bridges and FOC participants as closely as possible including matching for gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment status and credit score at intake.

## *Impact of Bridges on Whether Participants had a Job Improvement after Program Enrollment*

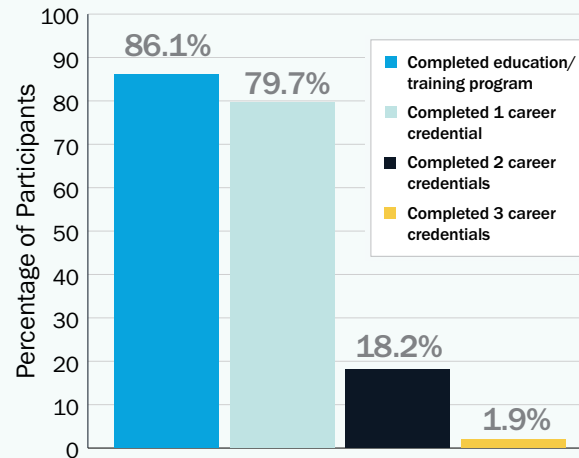


The Abt study found that Bridges graduates and ongoing students made important strides in their chosen careers, thanks in part to their work in the program.

**NOTE:** \*Difference is statistically significant at the .001 level. Data include 673 participants in Bridges programs and 566 participants in FOC programs. Percentage of participants represents those who had a "job improvement" in 1-14 months after program enrollment.

**SOURCE:** Bridges and FOC administrative data in Salesforce: FFT™ Employment Record/Job Advancement Record.

## *Education or Training Program Completion Status of Treatment Group*



The study tracked how Bridges completed their coursework with a large majority securing one or more key job credentials.

**SOURCE:** BCO administrative data in Salesforce: FFT™ Education/Training Record.



## Results:

There are important conclusions to draw from the study.

**1 Several data points underscore two key strengths of the Bridges program and how both promote strong outcomes.** First, the Bridges model is anchored on a holistic approach coupling students with coaches to actively shape a career, manage challenges, and devote their very best to acquiring new skills. A second cornerstone is presence – the bond of trust local organizations that run FOCs forge with participants in target communities. Combined, these two features contribute to the success of students as reflected in several metrics researchers identified. One is the high program completion rate as well as the percentage of students who earned occupational certification as noted above. Another example is the grade advancement Bridges participants made in foundational literacy. The findings compare very favorably with results logged in comparable education and training programs funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Professional Opportunity Grants.

**2 Bridges participants are winning raises and promotions - their advancement is even surpassing the strong numbers recorded by FOCs.** The study showed how Bridges made an appreciable difference in outcomes. One example the study cites is in job improvement. According to the data, 56% of Bridges participants were likely to have a raise or be elevated to a position of greater responsibility, compared to 37% of FOC enrollees. Researchers attribute the difference in part to the work Bridges participants put into identifying and selecting career pathways and the ongoing reviews that students perform as they complete basic skills classes and earn credentials.

**3 The Bridges program is adaptable and yet consistent. The study found that host organizations can mold it to the specific needs of communities and still provide core services and curriculum in keeping with the LISC model.** Bridges was designed to allow organizations flexibility to tailor or modify its four components (education, financial coaching, employment services, and income support services) to meet the needs of local populations and regional job markets. In the study, researchers found that LISC guidance has ensured that delivery of all four services has remained consistent and uniform across the country. Sites that accomplished this best could tap into previous experience as FOC centers or had close relationships with external organizations to better help clients with low incomes or skills gaps.

**4 The evidence shows that Bridges participants are improving their finances, although a fuller examination of the program's impact on wellbeing will require more time.** Abt found that 68% of Bridges participants saw their credit score increase – one measure of an improvement in their overall financial circumstances. At the same time, the study reported that almost 80% of the individuals enrolled in FOCs had an increase in their credit scores. One reason for the difference, researchers believe, is the fact that Bridges participants spend three to six months in preparatory training. According to the study, over a longer period, the increases for both programs would likely even out.



## Looking Forward

Our work here is important because of the link between the economy and the well-being of people earning low wages. The 2020s are shaping up to be a decade when awareness of economic disparities becomes a touchstone issue. We are already seeing increased calls to address the problem of job seekers who are frequently trapped in a cycle of unemployment or inadequately compensated employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated inequalities. It threw the U.S. economy into a tailspin and triggered a disruption that turned job markets upside-down, pushing 30 million people out of work, and bringing economic activity in many sectors to a halt. A recovery seems destined to be prolonged and uneven, affecting regions and economic sectors in different ways. At the same time, key industries have reported pronounced labor shortages.

As the Abt study proves, one prime strength of the Bridges model is its flexibility in adapting to fit diverse regions and cities. Our community organization partners have demonstrated the ability to respond nimbly to changes and modify Bridges programs to reflect a fluid job market or the overall economic climate.

Bridges has logged impressive successes to date. We look forward to making our impact even greater and more meaningful well into the future.