Best practices to reduce the impact of poverty in communities, education, healthcare, and more
FROM VISION TO ACTION

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This book, *From Vision to Action*, grew out of a desire to share more widely the growing body of knowledge, experience, and best practices of our certified trainers and champions, licensed sites, clients, and partners as they have been applying principles and constructs found in aha! Process publications—as well as to highlight their own stories and successes.

The articles in *From Vision to Action* have been peer-reviewed and chosen for publication by the five-member review team below. We recognize the many hours devoted to both writing and reviewing these articles, and we extend our gratitude to all writers and reviewers for sharing their time and expertise with us.

Thanks again to everyone for making this book possible.

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Introduction

There is no greater compliment than to have practitioners apply your ideas—especially when it’s done successfully and to good effect. This publication represents the work of people and organizations that went beyond adherence to a model. The writers—from Bridges® communities, sectors, and P–20 education—have taken ownership of the concepts found in aha! Process publications, and advanced the work with innovations they are sharing with you now. In so doing, they follow an evolving grassroots tradition that began several years ago when eight communities gathered to share best practices at the first annual Bridges conference.

In From Vision to Action we hope to support the growing community of learning in various sectors whose work is crucial to our efforts to address the multiple causes of poverty. The annual conferences—and now this publication—are an integral part of the infrastructure that drives this movement.

All of this is in the context of walking with people who are struggling to make ends meet and communities that want to ensure a good life and pass it on to the next generation. Each application or innovation described here adds to our knowledge base. The work deepens as relationships of mutual respect are developed, as people from different classes, sectors, and political persuasions cooperate to topple the barriers that stand in the way of people who are working toward a stable life and higher resources.

In these pages you will read about new insights and shifting paradigms as we continue to adopt a language and set of constructs that change the way individuals, institutions, and communities address poverty. Members of the review team, along with the consultants and associates at aha! Process, are inspired by the creative applications and fresh language found in this collection of papers.

You are encouraged to build your own future story as you read and reflect on these practical and concrete strategies—and join our learning community.
Today, 46.2 million Americans live in poverty, and the number is rising. For residents of South Bend, Indiana, it is almost one in four. The St. Joseph County Bridges Out of Poverty Initiative (SJC Bridges) began in 2004 from a women’s leadership effort that wanted to find a way to break the cycle of poverty. The effort grew quickly as a community collaborative led by a cross-sector steering committee and in 2008 formed as a nonprofit. South Bend was recently named one of the top 10 dying cities in America by Newsweek (“America’s Dying Cities,” 2010), and SJC Bridges believes that factors influencing this won’t change significantly unless poverty is addressed as a sustainability and quality of life issue for all our residents. Nancy King, one of the SJC Bridges founders and current board chair, who is also a business leader in the South Bend Hall of Fame, said it this way:

Our community cannot sustain itself unless we address and significantly reduce the amount of poverty that exists in our county. More importantly, as a human being, I believe that we must make it possible for individuals who live in poverty in our community to achieve self-sufficiency. The Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) process is an effective strategy to accomplish both of these goals.

Since 2004 SJC Bridges has been using education and advocacy to bring social workers, employers, realtors, faith leaders, educators, bankers, and community
leaders together with people in poverty to take action in new ways. Founding organizations like St. Margaret's House and the YWCA engaged with Bridges® to build their organizational capacity for greater effectiveness and to bring Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World (DeVol, 2006) to their clients as a “value added” tool. They, along with 12 other partner agencies, have graduated more than 400 people from Getting Ahead™. Kathy Schneider, executive director of St. Margaret’s House, says:

I am in my 21st year as executive director of an agency that serves women and children in poverty, and I find Bridges to be one of the most worthwhile things that we do for our guests. When I co-facilitate and see the positive movement forward the women make, it gives me renewed energy for everything else I have to do.

A survey of the partner agencies showed that:

Upon their clients’ completion of the program, a majority of the agency contacts interviewed saw a positive impact on their clients’ confidence, self-esteem, and perspective of and hope for the future ... [They] became more confident and more equipped to collaborate, communicate, and network with a wide range of individuals within their peer group, their agency, and the larger community ... [They] gained a better understanding of their role in the community and now view themselves as contributing members. (Lake, Costanzo, Flynn, & Way, 2010)

Once formed as a nonprofit, SJC Bridges continued to educate and engage new groups and sectors, many of whom became committed in new ways and have reported having transformative experiences in their understanding of poverty.

In the course of its work, SJC Bridges has evolved a list of core lessons learned and developed a set of core action steps which address needs raised by the core lessons. This article will share the lessons learned and illustrate some of the ways in which the action steps address the problems and bridge the gaps that became evident in the lesson-learning process.

Lessons Learned by SJC Bridges

1. We live segregated lives.
2. Poverty is not one monolithic experience, and people experience poverty in many complex and interlocking ways; therefore, our responses need to be varied and targeted.
3. Poverty is a trap, and the journey begins with hope and motivation.
4. It takes more than safety nets to assist people in the transition out of poverty.
5. The journey is nonlinear, and we need to build tolerance and capacity to sustain the process.
6. Doing nothing costs something.
7. Effective input and leadership from people in poverty is required for the plans to progress.
8. It will require a new vision and shared accountability within and among social services and “helping organizations.”
9. It will require “collective impact” to significantly reduce poverty; that is, all sectors must become involved and coordinated, including structural elements.

**Action Steps Developed and Implemented by SJC Bridges**

1. Develop shared understanding with professionals using Bridges Out of Poverty training.

2. Develop shared understanding with people in poverty using Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World.

3. Provide continuous support for people in poverty through monthly networking meetings.

4. Address the financial vulnerability of people in poverty using financial management classes.

5. Assist people in poverty in getting and keeping jobs through the Future Story Project.

6. Encourage and equip people in poverty to provide effective input and take on leadership roles.

7. Close the social, as well as the economic, divide by equipping and encouraging middle-class stakeholders to be allies who make poverty a key issue for their families, organizations, workplaces, and political representatives.

8. Address systemic changes by bringing to the table community leaders who can link ending poverty to economic development goals.

**How Understanding Leads to Action**

Learning lessons is important, but where SJC Bridges excels is in developing, implementing, and refining best practices that use the lessons learned to have a positive impact on the community. Eric Ries’s idea for “lean startups” applies: Think big; start small; scale fast. And the solutions must engage the whole community and not just fixate on individual behaviors.

Though not every action taken starts out as a perfect solution to the needs identified, SJC Bridges is committed to asking questions, collecting hard data and input from participants in all sectors, and continually improving our methods—a commitment that leads to the development of tested, effective best practices. In this section of the article we will further explore the lessons learned and join them with the action steps that SJC Bridges uses to address them.

**Lesson 1:** We live segregated lives.

**Lesson 2:** Poverty is not one monolithic experience, and people experience poverty in many complex and interlocking ways; therefore, our responses need to be varied and targeted.

America is an economically segregated country, and income inequality and income segregation grew substantially between 1970 and 2000, more significantly so for Black families than White families (Reardon & Bishchoff, 2010). In economically distressed areas of South Bend, populations are dwindling as more and more homes are abandoned, but poverty is be-
coming more concentrated as the people left behind are more isolated.

Many people in poverty face significant barriers to economic self-sufficiency, and every person’s barriers are different. Of the 26 people involved in one SJC Bridges program, 46% had been convicted of at least one felony, 50% had a negative work history that affected their ability to be employed again, and 42% were in recovery. That said, people in poverty have significant resources to draw on—some more than others—and many people are ready to start moving quickly to build on those resources.

One of the main resources that helps people in poverty break the cycle is relationships, and some of the most important relationships people in poverty build are with people in the community who are already advocating for them, who are providing services, and who are supportive in other ways. However, creating relationships across economic class requires intention and understanding, and not everyone who works with and/or advocates for people in poverty has a deep understanding of economic class and the dynamics of poverty. SJC Bridges’ first action step works to fill in the gaps in understanding in order to enable people to work more effectively across economic class.

**Action Step 1: Develop shared understanding with professionals using Bridges Out of Poverty training.**

Since 2004 SJC Bridges has presented Bridges Out of Poverty workshops to more than 3,000 people. Evaluations and verbal feedback indicate that these presentations are very well received, with many participants reporting genuine changes in their thinking about the way they relate to, work with, and serve people in poverty. Getting Ahead graduates frequently attend and participate in these trainings, deepening their own analysis and sharing it with other participants in a way that often impacts their own understanding. This year SJC Bridges started experimenting with the design so that the Bridges workshop can be offered in smaller chunks over several weeks, allowing more reflection, reading, and integration into the mission of the sponsoring agency. The first partnership of this kind brought SJC Bridges together with Habitat for Humanity of St. Joseph County. Executive Director Jim Williams said, “The Bridges Out of Poverty training … provided to our Habitat staff was invaluable because it increased our sensitivity to the needs of our partner families … [and gave] a better understanding of what it really means to live in poverty and what it takes to break the cycle.”

SJC Bridges provides hundreds of hours of shorter presentations throughout the community, particularly to students in the five colleges in the area. Nancy Turner, professor of education at Saint Mary’s College, said, “I can attest to the fact that teacher candidates walk away from these talks with a heightened awareness of the implications of poverty and with a strong sense of personal commitment to enhancing the lives of future students in all socio-economic situations.”

Not only is SJC Bridges sharing understanding with professionals, but thanks
to the motivation of many Getting Ahead graduates to use education as their pathway out of poverty, the graduates are becoming those professionals. South Bend’s local community college, Ivy Tech, is the natural next step for many, and more than 80 have stepped into higher education. The human services degree attracts people because it allows them to find a career where they can both give back to the community and continue analyzing their own life experiences. Faculty and staff there are partners ready to support graduates on this critical next step of their journey. Joann Phillips, chair of the human services program, reflects:

At Ivy Tech, many of my human services students have graduated from the Getting Ahead program, either when they were clients of local agencies who then decided to further their education, or while they were students, in the on-campus program that Bonnie implemented. Either way, their lives are forever changed by this experience as they gain knowledge and confidence to not only succeed as individuals, but to become change agents for the entire community. I believe the human services program at Ivy Tech serves as an entry point for many minority and underserved students to enter the field of social work, and Bridges is a critical component of their education. Therefore, the entire community benefits as the students gain a basis of understanding that many will add to their personal experiences of poverty and pass on during their professional careers.

Lesson 3: Poverty is a trap, and the journey begins with hope and motivation.

There is no question that poverty can trap people in a vicious circle that often seems overwhelming and inescapable. Of the 26 participants in one program offered by SJC Bridges, 50% were balancing the needs of their children at home, 42% identified debt as a significant barrier, and 23% were trying to move into a decent home—not including those living in subsidized housing. The experience of poverty is profound in part because people (especially people who grew up in poverty) view their experience as the norm, which makes it harder to see pathways out. These factors make the second part of Lesson 3 all the more important: The journey begins with hope and motivation. SJC Bridges has found that the best way to inspire hope in and motivate people from poverty is to empower and equip them to analyze and improve their own situations.

Action Step 2: Develop shared understanding with people in poverty using Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World

People in poverty need access to the same Bridges Out of Poverty concepts as professionals and others in order to lead the change process for themselves and engage with the wider community. Feedback from graduates indicates over and over that Getting Ahead allows participants to understand how poverty works—and when you know how something works, you can change the outcome. That metacognitive process becomes a key source of hope and motivation. Lori Whaley, who is a Getting Ahead graduate and now a Getting Ahead
facilitator and SJC Bridges board member, said it well:

Sometimes you don’t realize that you’re stuck because it has become a way of life … It’s normal! … I was afraid to step outside the box, to be unstuck. There were untapped resources within the community that I hadn’t realized before. The Getting Ahead course helped me to realize that I wasn’t stuck and that there was hope for me.

Participants in Getting Ahead do a rigorous inventory of their resources and relationships, keeping in mind areas where they can build and people who are in a position to help them. They create and evaluate their own plans for building resources, rather than the standard approach where agencies bring resources to them. This process of guiding people through a process of discovery and equipping them to shape their own future story based on their own goals and desires creates a profound sense of ownership that motivates people to keep moving forward when they graduate from the program. Sustaining that motivation and progress after the program, though, isn’t always as easy as it sounds.

**Lesson 4:** It takes more than safety nets to assist people in the transition out of poverty.

**Lesson 5:** The journey is nonlinear, and we need to build tolerance and capacity to sustain the process.

In order to get by, most poor people piece together a wide range of resources from various local, state, and federal programs—from subsidized housing to a small disability check to free community lunches. It creates a fragile safety net that is stressful and at times grueling to manage, absorbing time, resources, and creativity.

To complicate matters, many state and federal programs have “benefit cliffs” where people entering the workforce trade off more subsidies (housing, food stamps, childcare, and/or healthcare) than they gain in income, creating another disincentive to leave poverty. The lack of resources means there is a slim margin for error, and as people get one resource in place, another can fall apart. A health problem, flat tire, or sick child can be enough to throw plans into a tailspin. Add to that instability the fact that getting work often means being disconnected from the local safety net (because agencies are usually only open during business hours) or requires taking time off work to access them, which can threaten your job.

Safety nets are critical in alleviating suffering, but they don’t make good bridges. Aiding people in the transition out of poverty requires more. Even when people work hard and take all the necessary steps, it can still take a long time to get to financial stability—research says two to five years; we think it is often much longer.

The process is usually not smooth or linear; it is up, down, and sideways. But when graduates of SJC Bridges Getting Ahead take a step backward—because of circumstances beyond their control, relapse issues, or personal choices—they tend to get back into action with their plans to
move ahead faster and with more focus. To support this long-term process, SJC Bridges put in place new programs, which are discussed in action steps 3–5.

**Action Step 3:** Provide continuous support for people in poverty through monthly networking meetings.

**Action Step 4:** Address the financial vulnerability of people in poverty using financial management classes.

**Action Step 5:** Assist people in poverty in getting and keeping jobs through the Future Story Project.

When SJC Bridges started as a nonprofit, we were committed to some guiding principles: Don't replicate good programs in the community; no case management (because others do that better, it stays focused on treating individuals, and it is a resource-intensive way to address the problem); be a catalyst that addresses systems change; and collaborate, collaborate, collaborate!

Getting Ahead provides people with tools and insights for the journey out of poverty, but they also need support after they graduate. Social capital theory tells us that a segregated community—whether it is segregated by class, race, religion, or another factor—is inherently unhealthy. Those divides can be deeply entrenched and difficult to bridge. A key form of support provided by SJC Bridges’ monthly networking meetings is the opportunity for people in poverty to forge relationships with people outside of poverty who can help and encourage them in the process of building their resources. However, the benefits of these relationships are by no means one-sided; middle-class allies and partner agencies gain a deeper understanding of people in poverty, their strengths, and the barriers they face—and they strengthen their commitment to community change. Barbara Jung is a retired minister and served as an AmeriCorps member last year for SJC Bridges. She reflects on her experience as an ally:

As a middle-class person who always considered myself “compassionate,” I learned much that I did not know from the Bridges programs. I came to appreciate how creative people in poverty can be at resolving their own problems when given a half a chance. I came to appreciate the courage and strengths that are present in the group already. Bridges has the capacity to raise awareness in the middle and upper classes that does not create guilt but promotes understanding in ways that support and encourage practical solutions.

Opportunities for advocacy and partnerships also emerge. Last year, when the South Bend Public Transportation Corporation, which operates South Bend’s bus system, proposed cuts in services and hours, both graduates and allies turned out in force, creating much more public focus on this critical issue. They wrote letters and editorials, spoke out at meetings and in the media, and influenced the outcome. This summer, 18 graduates and allies together went through a Compassionate Listening training, a method for deep listening that finds its roots in many spiritual practices and cultural traditions. It emphasized the importance of listening
without judgment, as well as the power of being heard, as sources for emotional healing and conflict resolution. The room was abuzz with sharing, and one person said, “I cannot find words to express how this has opened my eyes and thoughts.”

Another aspect of the monthly networking meetings that makes them successful is that the structure is not overly intense or costly but still allows for high-impact community involvement. In 2011 attendance averaged 82 people per meeting, with eight sponsors and regular volunteers. Thirty-two speakers covered 11 community topics, including healthcare, banking and community resources, leadership, and financial predators. Each month’s meeting is a chance not only to learn about community resources, but also to see incremental progress. Here are some examples of what graduates told us they are doing to get ahead:

- I finished my entrepreneur class.
- I made a very good network of positive people.
- Go to class.
- Cleaning up my credit.
- Move into a different house.
- Pray.
- Made the newsletter.
- Budgeting and using envelopes.
- Continued my long-term goal of returning to college.
- Job hunting and lost 17 pounds.
- Looking for employment.
- I am attending the financial class to own my own business.
- Preparing to help three grandsons graduate. I’m so excited for these boys; our boys can do this.

Going forward, graduates will increasingly take on leadership roles to support the networking meetings, including writing the monthly graduate newsletter.

Building social capital is important, and so is building financial capital; i.e., confidence, competence, and behaviors to manage money effectively in order to accomplish goals. In poverty many people feel overwhelmed and not in control of their limited finances. To complicate matters, without financial competence, people in poverty are vulnerable to excessive banking charges, unmanageable debt, bad credit, financial predators, and other dangers. Payday lenders are ubiquitous in poor neighborhoods, often advertising themselves as providing “check cashing” services, then tempting people into short-term loans. In Indiana interest rates are “capped” at 390%, and that outrageously high cap makes it easy for people to get trapped in a cycle of debt. Complicating this, many financial literacy programs start with middle-class assumptions and language that only adds to people’s sense of failure and alienation.

Started in 2009, SJC Bridges’ financial management class has served more than 100 Getting Ahead graduates on their road to self-sufficiency. Participants learn how to implement a feasible spending plan, repair credit, and avoid financial predators as they gain access to banks and microloans, giving them more financial strategies and choices. Lake City Bank has been
the lead partner, providing accounts, microloans, and other incentives to participants who complete the financial management program, great resources to get people into the banking system.

SJC Bridges took the FDIC Money Smart curriculum (which allows people to be eligible for individual development accounts) and made it more meaningful and interactive for our participants. Amber Werner, a graduate who is now the class instructor, is gifted in understanding how to integrate mental models, speakers, and interactive processes as tools for building participation and trust. Involving financial mentors means every participant leaves knowing someone who can assist him or her later. We now have 25 mentors from 15 institutions who also receive training to increase their effectiveness. Participant Minerva Grisham’s financial mentor helped her decide about a land contract. “I felt more comfortable and more confident with using the banking system after taking the financial management class. I learned I had choices and options,” Grisham said. Every graduate of the class has reported that they now feel more confident in using a bank, avoiding fees, and developing a plan to get out of debt. More than 70% want a financial mentor to assist them as they stabilize their financial resources, and the class has doubled the number of people who said they would use a budget.

While building social networks and financial resources are critical tools, the bridge out of poverty comes down to employment. And if employment is the solution, then employers need to be at the table with their own problem solving approaches too. And that means finding ways that engage employers so that, just like social service agencies, they see the “value added” and concrete results.

Our first effort in this direction was launching the Future Story Project, which is based on the idea from Cincinnati Works that keeping a job is harder than getting one. We worked closely with the Michiana Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) to create a pipeline to connect Getting Ahead graduates with jobs. Our employment specialist helps match people to the best jobs, to support them if they run into problems, and to provide training and support to human resources personnel and supervisors.

The program worked. The Future Story Project developed 13 core employers. After the project’s first year, nine graduates were employed with the employer partners, three of them for more than a year. Another eight were on deck, and three were completing the GED requirement. In the second year, 20 graduates were employed, 12 of whom stayed employed. One employer changed their policy on hiring people with felonies. The project garnered national attention, being featured in SHRM’s international journal, and played a crucial role in the Michiana SHRM receiving the 2010 SHRM Pinnacle Award.

Increasingly, our efforts began to look like case management, with the intensive staff time that entails, as we encountered the entrenched problems people often face as a result of years in poverty with limited resources, particularly long-term, destabilizing issues like poor health and addiction. And while there were some unique
components in our program, we felt there were other successful programs to which we could send graduates for training and jobs.

Thanks to support from the Memorial Hospital of South Bend’s Community Health Enhancement project and other funders, SJC Bridges has been able to innovate and keep learning from these efforts. Going forward, the Future Story Project platform will provide the foundation for the next step in creating a stronger employment bridge for the community through an employer resource network (ERN) similar to Working Bridges in Vermont and The SOURCE in Grand Rapids, Michigan. An ERN is an employer-driven model that focuses on workplace-based supports primarily for entry-level and low-wage workers through the services of a resource navigator.

The process is straightforward: An employee has an issue or problem, and the resource navigator helps find a solution. We know that for under-resourced workers, a relatively small problem can escalate into lost work time or even a lost job. Stopping short of case management, the site-based resource navigators simply guide employees through a rapid problem resolution process that helps them resolve crises and keep working.

The resource navigators don’t just save valuable HR time, they also provide confidentiality and connect workers to community resources that HR staff and working people often don’t know about or don’t have time to research and access. Some companies are seeing a more effective use of the employee assistance programs. A Bridges ERN will also provide critical training and support to HR, supervisors, and other key staff to build organizational capacity, as well as the option of site-based or seat-based training for employees on topics like financial management.

Interest in ERNs is growing because they have been able to demonstrate a return on investment for employers, primarily by using metrics that measure success in terms that matter to employers, demonstrating such results as reduced turnover rates and lower absenteeism. Most ERNs show greater than 90% retention rates for those served by the programs, even when the overall company retention rate may be lower. One Michigan CEO reported a 291% return on investment for his company.

In some ERNs, like Working Bridges in Vermont, company leadership has taken additional steps for their employees. As a result, ERNs have increased employer awareness about poverty and the needs of low-income workers, developed business champions, and built new public and private partnerships. For example, the extensive use of payday lenders came to light through the ERN, so Rhino Foods created a low-interest, short-term loan program that lends up to $1,000. To date, more than $200,000 has been lent with only...
two defaults. This is a great example of employers being part of the larger problem solving process that SJC Bridges wants to duplicate.

**Lesson 6:** Doing nothing costs something.

**Lesson 7:** Effective input and leadership from people in poverty is required for the plans to progress.

**Lesson 8:** It will require a new vision and shared accountability within and among social services and “helping organizations.”

**Lesson 9:** It will require “collective impact” to significantly reduce poverty; that is, all sectors must become involved and coordinated, including structural elements.

Costs associated with childhood poverty in the U.S. total about $500 billion per year—about 4% of the nation’s gross domestic product (Greenberg, Dutta-Gupta, & Minoff, 2007)—but the real costs are much higher. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently released a study linking “toxic stress” experienced in childhood, which can be the result of persistent poverty and the frequent activation of a child’s “fight or flight” response, to negative mental, intellectual, and physical effects throughout the rest of the child’s life (Healy, 2011).

Patrick Murphy, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, put it this way:

> We know that kids who grow up poor are much more likely to end up being poor themselves. They’re more likely to have children too early with teen pregnancy. They’re more likely to become involved with the criminal justice system as they grow up. They’re less likely to be employed. And they’re less likely to fully use the talents that they’re given. (Woodruff, 2011)

Simply put, children who grow up in poverty have a much tougher time, which is why SJC Bridges focuses on breaking the cycle of generational poverty. The cost of doing nothing is greater than the cost of bringing stakeholders from all sectors and economic classes to the table to work together toward a solution.

A meaningful reduction in poverty requires cross-sector commitment and change on individual, organizational, community, and policy levels. SJC Bridges’ long-term goal is to support social services and helping organizations to redesign their own programs for greater impact and to collectively influence decisions at the community level. The Getting Ahead network meets several times a year to share resources, strategies, and best practices. Leveraging that into greater community impact is the next step. Our goal is to be a catalyst that can influence community leaders on the policy level, linking ending poverty to economic development goals.

**Action Step 6:** Encourage and equip people in poverty to provide effective input and take on leadership roles.

**Action Step 7:** Close the social, as well as the economic, divide by equipping and encouraging middle-class stakeholders to be allies who make poverty a key issue for their families, organizations, workplaces, and political representatives.
**Action Step 8: Address systemic changes by bringing to the table community leaders who can link ending poverty to economic development goals.**

It is a core Bridges principle that people in poverty need to be at the planning table using their experiences and insights to shape outcomes. But being at the table is different than being effective at the table. To be effective, participants need to know how to give meaningful feedback, which requires context, skills, confidence, and mentors.

Empowering people in poverty to take on leadership roles is a key goal. SJC Bridges has graduates stepping up to serve in board, staff, and AmeriCorps service roles. There are many success stories. Cathy Lenoir, a Getting Ahead graduate who became an AmeriCorps member, won the prestigious Indiana Governor’s Service Award in 2011. One board member, Lori Whaley, graduated two leadership programs, the Neighborhood Leadership Academy and the Michiana Diversity Leadership Initiative, and is about to enter the prestigious Leadership South Bend class this fall. We are developing a new leadership component that engages graduates in leading networking meetings, Getting Ahead classes, presentations, and ally trainings, as well as in giving critical feedback about these programs. Participants will learn new skills like facilitation, program planning, and assisting in assessing community resources and programs.

Philip DeVol, co-author of *Bridges Out of Poverty* and developer of Getting Ahead, visits South Bend frequently and acknowledges that our initiatives often serve as resources for the wider national network. Impressed by the breadth and depth of the work, he said:

South Bend is a laboratory for applying the Bridges concepts, and they keep innovating new and effective approaches. In South Bend I was shown a way for Bridges initiatives to increase their impact on their communities. The number of sectors engaged in the St. Joseph County Bridges Initiative includes business, health, K–12, postsecondary, economic development, and, with the new mayor, perhaps government. With all of these sectors applying Bridges concepts, the bridge to higher resources for Getting Ahead graduates is widening.

Each development brings new learning, opportunities, and challenges. But the evidence keeps pointing to the effectiveness of this approach that allows a link between core concepts and action that is replicable yet fluid enough for adaptation across sectors, communities, and economic classes.
References


Bonnie Bazata is the St. Joseph County Bridges Out of Poverty Initiative’s executive director. Prior to that, she held leadership positions with the Center for Women’s Intercultural Leadership (CWIL) at Saint Mary’s College, and before that with the Pima County Youth Opportunity Movement in Tucson, Arizona. In both settings she helped start programs that gained national recognition for their impact and achievement.

Bazata holds an M.A. in Bilingual/Multicultural Education from the University of Arizona, a teaching certificate from Prescott College, and a B.A. from Antioch College. She was a recipient of a Watson Fellowship studying Gandhian nonviolence in England and India.
Paying the Homeless to Stand Outside Your Business: Schenectady Bridges Project Turns Poverty Upside Down

interview with Michael Saccocio
conducted by Jesse Conrad

Introduction

The following interview of Michael Saccocio, the executive director and CEO of City Mission in Schenectady, New York, was conducted because City Mission is an organization that has taken the lead in a movement to implement Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) concepts in a variety of helping organizations in the broader Schenectady area.

City Mission has a proven track record of helping people move from poverty to sustainability. Their certified instructors combine the innovative principles of Bridges with years of experience working with people in poverty. Their leadership development programs for people in poverty have been recognized with recent awards, including:

- Tech Valley Nonprofit Business Council Executive Leadership Award—2011
- Chamber of Schenectady County Good News Award—2011
- Downtown Schenectady Improvement Corporation Susan Rosenthal Volunteerism Award—2010
- Downtown Schenectady Improvement Corporation Building Block Award—2008
Interview

**Jesse Conrad:** What was the main challenge you set out to address? What made you decide to develop and implement a new strategy?

**Michael Saccocio:** We were always very much focused on wanting to see transformed lives. City Mission is a homeless shelter. People are coming to us when they’re really, at this point, at rock bottom. We’ve always been focused on a need to see transformed lives, and from those transformed lives we can work toward a transformed community. We’ve come more recently to an understanding that the only way to make the transformed community sustainable is that the folks themselves have to be the leaders of it. So City Mission was going through a process where we were saying, “You know what? Maybe we’re trying too hard to be the leaders ourselves, and we need to reverse that by giving folks we’re working with an opportunity to participate and be on the team. We give them ownership, they’re the leaders of the team, and we can be on the team.”

We were going through that, and the new strategy came when one of our staff members attended a Bridges Out of Poverty training at the Schenectady County Department of Social Services. So she went to that training and came back to me and said this is some amazing stuff. I started reading it, and the biggest thing that broke through was how much we didn’t understand. I think we were vulnerable to thinking we were experts because many of us had spent almost our entire careers working with people from poverty, so you kind of assume that you know everything there is to know. Bridges® materials and trainings really got us to better realize that there’s a lot we didn’t understand, but from that understanding, a whole new strategy could emerge in which our folks were being trained to be leaders and to really be part of community transformation and change.

**JC:** It sounds like you were enthusiastic from the start, especially about some of the more collaborative aspects of Bridges.

**MS:** We were, Jesse, especially once we got over the humbling experience of realizing that there were still things we didn’t understand. It completely was about excitement and feeling like now we had better information, better understanding, and then as we began to implement, we saw success. The next step we took, which was a big thing for us, was that we had Philip DeVol come to City Mission. At this point we wanted to make an impact in the community, but my focus was that I had to get City Mission, the organization that I lead, to buy into this, to own the Bridges principles and constructs, and then start showing how well these ideas would work. Phil came in 2008, and in addition to giving us two great days of training, he did a wonderful thing for us. At the end of two days I went up to him and said, “OK, what’s the next training?” and Phil said, “No training right now. You need to start embedding this stuff.” In a very wise way, he challenged us to see that there’s still a lot to learn, but you have to start putting this stuff to work. And that really led to our first of two tipping points.
I’m not sure, in terms of physics, if you can have two tipping points, but we had an in-house tipping point and a community tipping point. The in-house tipping point was that as we embedded Bridges constructs, things started working, and I’ll give you two examples. We saw that the first group of our folks who went through Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (DeVol, 2006) classes quite simply had a better understanding of what things were like, what they needed. They understood themselves better, they understood the community better, and they immediately started making life decisions that got them on track for getting ahead in life. One great victory was that one of the participants was in drug court at the time, living at the mission, and her life change was so profound that the judge who ran drug court called us and said, “I’ve never seen such remarkable transformation in an individual. She says the mission is really helping her, and she said something about a course called Getting Ahead™.” The judge then challenged her to get supreme court approval in New York State to bring Getting Ahead to drug court participants. She made two presentations to two New York Supreme Court judges. I had the privilege of driving her there and saying a few words. Right off the bat that flip I was talking about—where she was becoming the leader and I was on the team—she was leading it, and by virtue of her testimony, we got permission to start offering Getting Ahead classes to Schenectady City and County drug court participants, and that’s still going today.

So that was one major in-house tipping point, and then there were smaller examples, but still profound. One smaller way embedding Bridges constructs had an impact was on our transitional housing program. We did verbal, sort of abstract presentations for residents who we hoped would move into these apartments, and we were really hitting a stumbling block with people wanting to participate. We couldn’t understand it. It was such a good opportunity, and my instinct was to attribute their lack of participation to either a lack of desire or lack of gratitude, but confronted with some of the Bridges teachings, we began to understand that we were presenting all this stuff in an abstract way, and we needed to create a mental model of what our transitional housing was going to be. So we created a model apartment, got it all furnished, and did some other concrete things, and that changed everything. From that point on a waiting list developed for people to get into those apartments. It’s fascinating: These are people who had been with us for years. You’d think that by virtue of the relationship we had with them, our presentation would work, but it was the Bridges teachings that said people learn differently, process information differently, and we needed to create a working mental model for this transitional housing program, and doing that gave us a significant boost.

“The in-house tipping point was that as we embedded Bridges constructs, things started working ...”
The second tipping point was in the community. We were getting enough successes in-house that we decided it was time to share it with our collaborative partners in the community, and the tipping point there was that everybody I presented the Bridges principles to got excited. And everywhere I went, people who had great hearts to help people in poverty but also great struggles and probably great frustrations, they experienced continuous aha moments. And I came back from that saying, “My goodness, this stuff not only works here at the mission, there’s a universal quality to these trainings.” So I think the tipping point was when we decided that this needed to be a communitywide movement, and City Mission committed to playing a leadership role in making that happen.

**JC:** It sounds like you worked to spread the ideas and perhaps tapped some social and business networking resources in the community. What else did you find that you needed to get into place in order to get going?

**MS:** We did, very much so. I was so impressed with the materials, that, in order to get started at the mission, I dipped into our savings because I didn’t have a budget for implementing the new ideas. I felt we had to start off strong, and to bring Phil DeVol in, we dipped into savings to make sure we were doing it right.

Because the mission has been in the community for more than 100 years, we had good relationships, so that was the open door to other organizations, in a way. But I think the open door was not just the fact that people knew who we were, but really that I could share some of these concrete victories. So I would go and give a very basic overview of Bridges and share my own story at City Mission, and really emphasize that we’d discovered these incredible resources called aha! Process and Bridges Out of Poverty—and everybody wanted in. That led us to submit a grant to the Schenectady Foundation, a local private foundation that, like many foundations, is trying to create collaboration, a big part of doing the job better. They gave us a $21,000 grant in 2011, which gave us the resources to offer genuine two-day Bridges Out of Poverty trainings for staff members. In 2011 we trained 144 staff members from seven participating agencies in Schenectady, including City Mission, and that was how we really took it to the next level in terms of getting the strategies out.

**JC:** Did City Mission secure the grant on its own and share the resources, or was it more of a collaboration from the start?

**MS:** The mission was the lead advocate, but we wouldn’t have gotten the grant unless we could demonstrate that these other agencies were going to be equal partners, that they were all in on it. It was a genuine collaboration. It wasn’t wishful thinking on the mission’s part. But as you know about grants, there are some up-front commitments that have to be made, and the mission was willing to make all of them. We had a staff member who would work part-time doing nothing but what we called the Schenectady Bridges Project, so anywhere there was a gap that needed to be filled, including providing some funds to get some things going, the mission glad-
ly played that role. So it all started in April 2011, and we brought Terie Dreussi-Smith in for two days of training with 50 people from seven agencies participating, and we also brought Phil back to meet with the CEOs and some other community leaders of these agencies, and that really got us going strong.

In addition, the mission and two of the other participating agencies sent staff members to attend Bridges Out of Poverty Facilitator Training, and after Terie and Phil got us started, three of us ran the remaining Bridges trainings for our community, and at this point 144 people have been trained in the Bridges strategies and constructs.

But I think what made it a big achievement for us wasn’t so much that the number 144 is stunning, but we were able to connect seven moving parts and get them to commit to learning and embedding the Bridges ideas. What I learned is that it’s much more valuable to make sure that there’s a diversity of agencies represented, even if that slows you down in terms of generating numbers. One of our partners is Ellis Medicine. They are the big player in this and are the only hospital in Schenectady County, and they have a very large budget. If we had worked solely with them, we probably could have trained 200 people just through them, but we really wanted to get everybody on board.

That said, Ellis has become a real champion of Bridges—they’re on fire with it—and they’re becoming a national voice in the Bridges Out of Poverty/Bridges Into Health arena. We were able to bring Terie back in March 2012, and she spent a day at the mission and then went to Ellis to meet with the CEO and some of the vice presidents to touch base with them and brainstorm about the future.

JC: So, to sum up, what would you say was the most valuable resource that you discovered and utilized in the process of getting started?

MS: I think that people who were excited about it really became the lead resource. What I didn’t expect—and what has been the most important thing—is that many people who went through the trainings were really given the freedom to implement what they learned. It’s great that CEOs and vice presidents are committed to this, but the biggest breakthrough was that front-line people who had the training went back to their worksites and started developing new policies and models based on what they learned in that Bridges training.

A great example is Ellis Medicine’s dental unit. They’re working with low-income people, and they realized that their formal appointment schedule was a real barrier to getting people in there. So they worked with Schenectady Head Start, another participating agency, and they created one day a month that would be reserved for all the Head Start students so they could come to the Ellis dental unit without appointments. The whole day was reserved for them. By doing that they took away the 20 details that kept kids from getting follow-up dental care. So now the Head Start people know that, on this day of the month, we fill up the van with kids who need dental work, we literally just show
up, and they make it work for us. And Ellis is now considering expanding that concept to other parts of the hospital.

JC: So it wasn’t just that the ideas spread quickly, but the ideas were being implemented in people’s day-to-day work?

MS: Well said. I think as we work toward the next steps, what’s really going to make this become a tipping point community-wide is that the front-line folks are becoming the innovators, the inventors, the creators of systems change. That’s been very exciting.

JC: Well, Michael, I must say that I’m truly impressed by everything you’ve shared so far. It sounds like big things are happening in Schenectady.

Let’s move on to results. Now that you’ve spent some time spreading the Bridges ideas around the community and implementing them, what kinds of results are you seeing?

MS: I’ll give you one example of a concrete result that has really stemmed from Bridges. City Mission is located in downtown Schenectady. Our downtown, like lots of downtowns in the Northeast, went through a couple decades’ worth of decline, where the downtown became nearly vacant, just boarded-up buildings everywhere you looked. And what happened was that, because the property got cheap downtown, a lot of social service agencies moved their offices downtown. That’s where the cheapest rents were and where the bus lines are, so the downtown got increasingly populated with folks coming from poverty.

In our downtown a group called Metroplex, an economic development agency, committed to a revitalization of downtown Schenectady about 10 years ago. They’ve been highly successful, and one of the things that has really been the key to that is that there’s a place called Proctors Theater, a 2,700-seat theater, that used to be a venue for vaudeville—a really cool place—and as Proctors has grown, they’ve seen in the last 10 years new restaurants, hotels, and businesses open up nearby. A genuine revitalization of downtown.

Okay, so what’s the problem? It’s pretty obvious. There are still these social service agencies smack dab in the middle of downtown, and often those two don’t mix well, right? A new restaurant opens, and folks are coming in next door for mental health treatment or something like that. At City Mission we are almost on the main block, and we have a 100-bed shelter for men, women, and children. So that is a pretty tense reality, and I understand the issues involved. Long story short, as it was evolving into an either/or battle in downtown Schenectady—we’re either going to have economic development or we’re going to be populated by folks in need of social services—the mission staff was getting trained in Bridges concepts, and we led a movement to adopt a third way. It’s

“It’s not either/or, not either economic development or helping people in need.”
not either/or, not either economic development or helping people in need. We can do both, and ideally the people in need are becoming stakeholders in that economic development.

So here’s what we did: We worked with Proctors Theater because we had a good relationship with them, and we created a program called the Downtown Ambassadors Program. The more senior City Mission residents who have been through Getting Ahead training go out every night there’s a show at the theater and greet the guests that are coming in. They have uniforms and flashlights, and they help people across the street, direct them to parking, get them to restaurants, hold the door open—it’s really like a sidewalk concierge service. This went so well that the economic development agency offered to pay our people if they’ll continue doing this. So now Proctors has a contract with us, and the other businesses nearby want more ambassadors to be working in front of their businesses, so what we have in downtown Schenectady is the top businesses starting to hold fundraisers to generate more money to get more ambassadors. What I like to tell people, and Bridges has been a big part of this, is that downtown Schenectady may be the only urban center in America where the businesspeople are paying the homeless to stand in front of their business and greet their guests.

**JC:** That’s a really interesting solution to the problem of the de-gentrification of a downtown and then the burgeoning re-gentrification. Finding that third way that doesn’t displace people is incredibly impressive.

**MS:** Thanks. What we realized was—and this was the great breakthrough—we realized we had to teach our folks who became ambassadors what the rules of the middle class are, what the rules of the theater are, what the rules of restaurant life are. Here was the Bridges breakthrough: Although it was very easy for them to learn the rules of the middle class, the fact that they also knew the rules of poverty was an extra benefit for them out there because when issues did come up that were more poverty-based, they knew how to deal with them.

As we implemented the ambassadors program, we thought, well, our folks will get it started, and then they’ll hire college students from Union College and let them do it. But do you know why they don’t? Because our folks are in a sense bilingual: They can learn the middle-class stuff, but they know the rules of poverty, and that is an asset for them. And that’s right out of the Bridges playbook, that these rules aren’t wrong, they’re just different. It’s all about understanding the context, it’s building on people’s strengths, so the Bridges material has really been a catalyst and an accelerator. And the ambassadors program is something that’s off the charts. Now we’re talking about creating healthcare ambassadors in the hospitals and health centers.

**JC:** Do you have a sense that the ambassadors would verbalize those kinds of concepts if you asked them? Would they say, well, with what we learned in Bridges, I can relate to all these kinds of people and I can handle any kind of situation that comes at me?
MS: Absolutely, yes. We have them go through a training called Ministry Manners that really teaches the hidden rules of middle class. And what they will come back and tell you is that they can put that information to use. But then maybe they’ll encounter someone who’s been drinking too much, or someone who’s passed out in the cold, or someone who’s just disoriented, and they immediately go into action. They know how to get them help. So I think they’re very proud that both parts of their background are now a resource that they’re taking with them into this job.

JC: That’s very cool that not only is the program a success, but the participants also gain that kind of metacognitive awareness of the changes in their own thinking and how that can be a resource.

MS: Absolutely. Another concrete example of results starts with one of our own women. This was the young lady I told you about who made such an impression on the drug court judge. She also became active with Ellis Medicine as a patient, but with her Getting Ahead training, she developed some very quality relationships. She embraced, better than anyone I’ve seen, the concept of bridging capital. She started creating it in the healthcare sector, in church, in all these areas, and the Ellis people were so impressed with her insight that she actually conducted a couple of training seminars with nurses and doctors in the emergency room to give them an understanding of how the ER looks to someone coming out of poverty. To help them understand some misconceptions they might have. It was a wonderful thing to see top-level doctors and nurses really listening to the insights of a person coming out of poverty, and everybody realized that this is not a complaint, this is not attacking each other. This is all about building more understanding to get better results for everybody.

JC: And she did that more than once?

MS: She did it a couple of times. She also spoke at Ellis Medicine’s Leadership Development Institute to the top 200 leaders in the hospital. I think one of the great goals of Bridges’ mission of building sustainable communities is that the table must be made up of people of all social and economic backgrounds, and we’ve really seen that happen in many different collaborative initiatives here in Schenectady. They are becoming truly diverse; we’ve really seen that breakthrough here. She’s been a great example of that.

On the Ellis end, they’ve really done some creative things. I told you about their experiment with a concept of open enrollment for people who need doctor’s appointments, getting away from the appointment system. That is just the essence of middle-class healthcare systems, so to see this major healthcare provider really trying to figure out different ways to make it more effective not only for themselves
but for the people they’re serving is really cool. And they’re trying to deepen their understanding in other ways too.

There was one day where a number of leaders from Ellis spent two hours on the local buses trying to get a better understanding of what public transportation is like. To me that’s a profound example because we’re talking about department heads and vice presidents taking hours out of their day because they had that tipping point, that aha moment where they said it is more than us just doing what we think is right and needed, we have to understand where our patients are coming from and how things that make sense to us can be enormous barriers to the people we’re trying to serve. Ellis really, in a sense, has a blank page that they’re writing on. They’re learning, studying, innovating, and I don’t think we could have a more effective advocate for Bridges work than Ellis in Schenectady.

JC: Would you say that the Bridges training led them to start with the dedicated Head Start open appointment scheduling, and then the success of that led them to rethink some of their other scheduling and create specific days where they would do walk-ins?

MS: That’s what they’re working on now. Bridges training redefined the paradigm. It broke down the old paradigm and started to open a new one, which they’re still in the process of creating. The appointments have been one of the real target areas, so yes, I think the folks in the dental unit created one of the early concrete models. I think they’re evaluating that data, which is one of the neat things about the hospital setting—they can really measure. And now from the progress they’re seeing there, they’re considering expanding it to a broader use in their services that are particularly working with people in poverty. So it’s been somewhat sequential, but it’s also organic, and in a sense it’s hard to trace what comes first.

JC: In a process like this, problems are inevitable. Could you take a moment to discuss some of the challenges you’ve faced?

MS: I think the biggest problem is always going to be the tyranny of the moment, especially in this difficult economy, when so many not-for-profits, especially those who have had long-term government funding, are in a fight for survival themselves. So when you get to that crisis, that can be either a good or a bad thing for the Bridges movement. Bad, obviously, because people get very myopic and they just have to focus on how to weather the storm. It can be positive because people realize that we can’t make it by doing what we’ve always done, that we need to bring something new and different, so in some ways it is good timing for Bridges because it can be a framework for a whole new way of getting the job done.

JC: That’s a really interesting perspective, that the service agencies themselves are suffering in the tyranny of the moment, a challenge that we usually discuss in terms of people in poverty not having enough resources to plan for the future and instead being more concerned with the continual struggle for daily survival.
MS: Right. In many ways the nonprofit organizations are also caught in that struggle right now.

JC: Are there any examples of something that you would have liked to see happen that didn’t happen because of pressing concerns, financial or otherwise?

MS: Sure. I really felt that we had to make sure that people were getting creative on the ground level and that the CEOs were staying aware of what the front-line people were doing. Nothing is more discouraging than to start innovating on the ground level and then have the CEO send the organization in a different direction. I really felt that CEOs had to meet monthly, but those monthly meetings broke down because several of the partners were in a financial crisis. They got word that long-standing funding streams were going to be gone, or were threatening to dry up. And because they had to do more lobbying and work harder to ensure their continued funding, the CEOs as a group were unable to move as efficiently with this as the front-line and mid-level people were.

JC: Wow. It’s really interesting to hear about the higher-ups in organizations losing focus a little bit—or shifting their focus elsewhere—in a similar way to that of the clients because of the tyranny of the moment.

MS: It’s very ironic and profound, isn’t it? That’s the biggest stumbling block for people in poverty to start getting ahead, and yet here are CEOs pretty much caught in the same trap.

JC: Well, I’m sure I’m not alone when I say I hope that situation improves—for the organizations and the clients.

So, to wrap up, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about some key lessons you’ve learned.

MS: The main lesson, in a general way, is twofold: First, you can train people and equip them, but then you have to give them the latitude to be innovative at ground level. Organizations that are doing this type of work have to change, they have to really want to get the benefit of Bridges, they have to create, and they have to give people authority at ground level to be flexible and innovative. Because I think that’s where the big breakthroughs are really going to come. With the frontline staff. There’s a tendency with organizations that deal with policies and procedures where they train and then choke the life out of it. And Bridges isn’t going to work like that. You have to train and then empower people to be creative.

The second part is—and this is not a bad thing—I’ve learned that the training can never end. It’s almost like exercise: You’ve never worked out once and for all. The reason for that is that the Bridges concepts are so different from the way we’ve always thought, that for us, even after several years of using them, there’s still an almost reflexive retreat back to what is comfortable and familiar. And so Bridges to me—and I mean this in every positive way—is like exercise in your workplace. You have to do it every day. And if you do, you will love the results. If you think you can just
coast along using the momentum from prior trainings and that will carry you. I think there’s going to be disappointment.

**JC:** Do it every day, but every once in a while go back to the experts and take it in again?

**MS:** Absolutely, because it’s different from the natural current of how things get done. And some of the systems that were created, they may not be working, but they’re predictable, and with the Bridges constructs we’re really bringing new voices to the table. You’re changing the way you’ve always done things, you’re giving a much bigger voice to folks who are receiving services, you’re granting leadership to them, you’re losing some control yourself, and that’s hard work. The results make it all worthwhile, but you have to stay intentional about working with these concepts every day and keeping them fresh in your mind.

**JC:** Finally, is there anything else you’d like to add?

**MS:** No, but thanks so much for the questions, and thanks for listening to me.

**JC:** Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. I’ll tell you, not knowing many of the details about the work you’re doing in Schenectady coming into this interview, I expected that I would be impressed, but actually I was much more impressed than I thought I would be! Keep up the great work!

**MS:** Thanks, Jesse, that’s very encouraging to hear, and thank you again for the interest in what we’re doing here in Schenectady.

**References**


Michael Saccocio is the executive director of City Mission of Schenectady, New York. In 2007 he was recognized by Schalmont Central Schools as one of five “alumni of distinction” at the district’s 50th anniversary celebration. He is a 2011 recipient of the Tech Valley Nonprofit Business Council Executive Leadership Award.

Saccocio was deputy mayor of Schenectady from 1992 to 1994. Prior to that he played professional baseball with the Montreal Expos. In 2010 Saccocio coached the Rotterdam Rangers baseball team (16-year-olds) to a victory in the National Amateur Baseball Federation’s World Series.

Saccocio is a graduate of Union College, Schenectady, and holds a master’s degree in Public Policy from Regent University, Virginia Beach, Virginia. He and his wife, Carol, live in Glenville, New York.
What Was the Challenge?

OUR REGION OF northeastern Ohio is not unlike areas all over the United States that are facing demonstrated, overwhelming need in our schools to support the increasingly diverse population of students who are challenged by academic rigors, while coming to school with less prerequisite knowledge and fewer skills.

Our urban school districts are considered high need as determined by the typology rating of Ohio School Districts from the Ohio Department of Education. The number of economically disadvantaged, low-median-income, and high-poverty students (and families) is growing at alarming rates. As a small liberal arts university, we felt called to become a part of the solution in our community and assist in contributing to better schools and learning conditions for area young people. Also, it is important to have good schools into which we send our pre-service teachers for high-quality, field-based experiences.

Millions of this nation’s school-age children are “under-resourced” and at risk of failure in school (Payne, 2008). Research shows that the greatest need for supports is at the foundational level, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, because many students are coming to school unprepared. The strongest evidence suggests that economically disadvantaged children reap long-term benefits from early education. However, children from all other socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to benefit as well (Barnett, 2008; Payne, 2005). Pre-K and K programs should be targeted because of the opportunity to

‘Naturally’ Good Teaching for Diverse Populations at the Early-Childhood Level

by Nancy Varian, Ph.D., and Beth Clark-Thomas, Ph.D.
influence the thinking of the youngest learners in alignment with Early Learning Content Standards through the process of engaging children in relevant experiences and guiding them through thinking and learning in purposeful and productive ways (Brewer, 2007). Piaget affirms that knowledge is constructed or built through the process of reflective abstraction in which the learner manipulates materials and subsequently reflects through dialogue, which ultimately changes thinking (Piaget, 1977). This idea is the foundation of inquiry-based science whereby hands and minds are engaged in the active process of experimentation with relevant materials (Bybee, 2010).

In addition, we found that early childhood is an underserved population. Programs and monies tend to target students at middle and high school when early intervention at the primary and elementary levels would seem most prudent. Primary classrooms and their teachers would benefit from a context around which a shared understanding of best practices could be built. We wanted the emphasis of our efforts to be on developing professional learning communities for sharing and disseminating instructional ideas and methods, which also would strengthen the ability of the teachers in these settings to collaborate and positively impact district-wide, early-learning math and science experiences (Dufour, Eaker, & Baker, 1998).

In addition, we needed the intentional inclusion of diversity training with methods for differentiating instruction in consideration of an increasingly diverse—cultural, poverty, English language learners (ELL), and special needs—population in the community. We sought ways to meet those needs by building awareness, embedding “best practices,” and focusing on the *how*, the *why*, and the *what* of learning (Payne, 2002) within the instructional methods for math and science. Our local schools’ early-childhood classrooms reflect increasing diversity. Fig. 1 reflects these demographics as reported in our project’s preliminary survey, which is completed annually by teacher participants as they begin the project.

**Fig. 1: Classroom Demographics of SUNBEAMS* Participants (2009–11)**

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<th>FY 08</th>
<th>FY 09</th>
<th>FY 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Students</strong></td>
<td>615</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage High Needs</strong></td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economically Disadvantaged</strong></td>
<td>49.27%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White/Caucasian</strong></td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black/Non-Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td>2.76%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pacific Islander</strong></td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Indian/Alaskan Native</strong></td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>2.93%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Students Understanding the Natural-world by Broadening the Education and Application in Math and Science
Our primary tasks were to secure substantial funding; to build partnerships with our neighboring urban, at-risk school district’s administrators and teachers; and to bring together a team to plan and facilitate a successful professional development program.

How Did We Meet the Challenge?

We set out to design a professional development model that would best support teachers of early-childhood students in diverse populations. At first, the model was intentionally designed to be intense and immersive, with a summer workshop in which teachers actively engaged in the practices and activities of effective math, science, and literacy instruction for diverse populations. The hands-on and inquiry-based workshop was followed by year-long incentives and supports including, but not limited to, fall and spring symposiums and expectations for data collection and reporting of findings from two common assessments. Data collected by an external evaluator confirmed that the project has had a positive impact on teachers of diverse populations, their instruction, and their ability to differentiate and design instruction for diverse populations of students (Fig. 2).

In preparing for the professional development, we tapped our existing university expertise in building strong professional development to assist teachers and administrators. The professional learning communities we built within each participating district and across district lines would be contexts for providing a captive arena for examining the impact of standards-based, research-based instructional models and methods of science and math instruction upon young children. So initially, we reached out to content specialist colleagues on our campus and utilized their experience and expertise in facilitation, in grant writing, and in both diversity and poverty training.

One of our faculty members received training from Dr. Ruby K. Payne and had been facilitating workshops using *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005) and *Bridges Out of Poverty* (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) in the instruction. This faculty member conducted sessions during our summer training that included sharing basic principles from the books, as well as elaborating on specific resources in our community. Those resources had been assembled during a communitywide Bridges Out of Poverty two-day seminar attended by more than 200 community leaders and led by one of the Bridges book’s authors, Terie Dreussi-Smith.

We further tapped educators in our area who had expertise in specific aspects of the project (i.e., math, science, literacy, exceptionalities, poverty, and diversity) and established ways they could contribute to the planning and facilitation of the project. This broad involvement of stakeholders, pre-kindergarten through college, also served to provide ongoing awareness of research-based methods of instruction in math and science—with the additional potential of positively impacting our own teacher candidates within undergraduate coursework in math and science content and methods.
Fig. 2: Post-Survey Results of SUNBEAMS Project Participants (FY 07 Through FY 10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall, the SUNBEAMS project:</th>
<th>Year 1 (FY07)</th>
<th>Year 2 (FY08)</th>
<th>Year 3 (FY09)</th>
<th>Year 4 (FY10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage answering AGREE or STRONGLY AGREE on Confidential Final Project Survey</td>
<td>N=25</td>
<td>N=30</td>
<td>N=30</td>
<td>N=30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided me with useful information I can apply to my classroom <em>math and science instruction</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided me with useful content information I can apply to my <em>math and science lesson planning and teaching</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided me with useful information I can apply to my <em>classroom assessment and evaluation of math and science</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered me new understandings on the use of <em>integrated math and science methods for my classroom</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered me new understandings on the use of <em>inquiry-based teaching and learning for math and science</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered me new understandings on the <em>role of literacy in science and math instruction</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered me new understandings about how to use <em>standards-based science and math content in my classroom</em></td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offered me new understandings about how to differentiate my math and science curriculum</strong></td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Offered me new understandings about cultural diversity and how to address and include it in my curriculum</strong></td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me build connections with other school, district, and area teachers and professionals</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was presented in a clear and thoughtful manner—I was able to learn the material being presented</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me to view my teaching in new ways</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next step was to secure a source of funding to launch our project. Initial project plans included materials and teaching resources we thought would be available through grants targeting science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM funds). Interestingly, in addition to such STEM funds available, we came across Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant funding opportunity. In 2007 we applied for and received an “Improving Teacher Quality” grant of $87,000 through the Ohio Board of Regents. This grant initiative was the perfect fit for our project because the goal of the state-funded initiative was to focus on professional development for educators in high-need local education agencies (LEAs).

The ultimate goal of the ITQ grant program is to increase student achievement. We realized, however, that one of the best ways to do this is to provide teachers of at-risk, economically challenged students with the highest quality professional development, resources, and support available. These aspects of supporting effective instruction would lead to improved learning since teacher effectiveness has long been positively linked to student learning. Building on the success of the first grant, we applied for funding each of the subsequent four years. To date, we have been awarded nearly $500,000 from the Ohio Board of Regents to expand our project to greater numbers of area educators working with increasingly diverse student populations. After successfully implementing the original grant project in the 2008–09 school year with pre-K and K educators, we observed great interest in and need for this in-depth professional development opportunity in math and science instruction, so starting with the 2011–12 school year we extended the project to include first and second grades. The project is called SUNBEAMS (Students Understanding the Natural-world by Broadening the Education and Application in Math and Science). Now in Year 5, SUNBEAMS has led to additional professional development being offered outside of the grant project but paralleling its proven model and impacting even greater numbers of teachers and classrooms in our urban area.

With the funding secured, we knew the content was crucial for high-quality professional development and student success. At this developmental level, it’s essential for students to develop foundational skills in scientific inquiry, problem solving, and questioning. These very skills are included in the Early Learning Content Standards for pre-K and K and are skills that many children—particularly under-resourced children—need in order to experience success in school (Payne, 2005). The lack of content literacy schema among economically disadvantaged children, children whose primary language is not English, and children with special needs is also a stumbling block to acquisition of essential math and science literacy skills. By including literacy connections with each unit, we are reinforcing the Early Learning Content Standards’ premise, namely: “A print-rich environment that allows children to engage in hands-on experiences that offer countless opportunities to practice literacy skills in real life, combined with explicit teaching of key concepts, is the foundation of literacy learning in preschool” (Christie & Roskos, 2003). Another
crucial part of the professional development included on-site field experiences for the teachers to demonstrate the importance of children being outside “doing science” and exploring nature (Louv, 2008; Goodenough, 2008).

In addition to embedding meaningful literary texts, informational texts, and outdoor applications—along with the rapidly expanding instructional applications of changing technology—we are intentionally modeling the embedded use of such tools as iPads, SMART boards, and digital cameras. Furthermore, teachers actively use this technology in the context of the professional development activities. Participating teachers have reported greater comfort with and appreciation of the instructional use of technology, having been supported and guided in its meaningful use throughout the project.

Goals of the SUNBEAMS projects include:

1) To develop the capacity of teachers to understand and utilize integrated math and science methods and standards-based content in pre-K, K, first-grade classrooms, and second-grade classrooms

2) To improve student achievement and learning outcomes as measured by teachers' reports of student acquisition of science and math content/skills and technology skills

3) To build professional learning communities within the schools through discussion and action research

4) To equip special educators, teachers of students whose primary language is not English, and early education teachers within high-needs LEAs with a greater understanding of and specific strategies for differentiating instruction with cultural diversity, poverty, and special needs in mind

The format for the training through the years has remained constant with few minor changes. A one-day spring workshop introduces 30 teacher participants and four administrator guests to the research-based, inquiry-based, and standards-based curriculum, models, and methods with strong literacy connections. An intensive two-week summer workshop actively engages teachers in scientific inquiry and mathematical problem-solving activities that align with developmentally appropriate practice using Ohio’s Common Core Content Standards in both math and science. Diversity, poverty, and ELL training embedded in the summer workshop assist teachers in differentiating their instruction and providing mental models for economically disadvantaged students (Payne, 2005), students with specific disabilities, and students for whom English is their second language.

Two follow-up symposiums (one day each in the fall and spring) bring participants together for the purpose of sharing their action-research results. The symposiums include the awarding of additional resources (via “mini resource grants”) to participants who have successfully begun to build professional learning communities within their schools—as demonstrated by a non-project colleague presenting his/her
own action research at the symposium according to the SUNBEAMS project model. Additional incentives for the participating teachers include a stipend for their involvement, along with receiving curriculum materials with aligned samples of literature and informational text for their classrooms. Participants also have the opportunity to earn 4 graduate credits at a specially reduced tuition rate from Malone University.

The main curriculum used has been research-based, National Science Foundation-funded, Lawrence Hall of Science integrated math and science programs: GEMS (Great Explorations in Math and Science). Teaching team members receive training in the use of the Lawrence Hall of Science materials to ensure adherence to the aims and purpose of proven research-based methods, models, and assessments prior to the project’s commencement. In addition to GEMS materials, however, many outstanding, research-based materials and resources are included, as well as contributions and work completed by the district participants in their professional learning communities.

Evaluation methods have included pre- and post-surveys of teachers, classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, electronic journal prompts (posed throughout the duration of the project), and exit tickets for professional development workshops. Additionally, student learning has been measured through teacher observation, along with pre- and post-assessments administered across the participant districts. To enhance project accountability and to triangulate varied data sources, our grant provided for an outside evaluator who has subsequently collected ethnographic and empirical data documenting the success of the project across each of its first four years.

What Results Did We Get?

Once we complete this current year’s professional development, nearly 150 pre-K to second-grade teachers and about a dozen administrators will have participated in our training, with an additional 145 of their colleagues taking part in action research, which has provided more training and insights. Participants come from seven districts (the original three urban districts, as well as “at risk” suburban and rural districts), so the distribution has far-reaching potential.

Doing standardized measurements of student learning at early-childhood ages is difficult. Teacher observation is truly a valid and developmentally appropriate tool. The teachers who deeply know their children, the environment, and the school culture are best able to articulate the students’ achievement. This is true particularly at the pre-K and K level, but as we designed the professional development training for the first and second grades, we were challenged to be intentional both in providing strong teacher assessments and for the teachers to learn to design assessments for the students. Data across the four years of the project to date demonstrate a positive impact on student learning. Fig. 3 reflects data from the third year (FY 09), which is similar across all four years’ data.
In the most recent year, as the project expanded to first and second grades where paper and pencil assessment is more appropriate for data collection, results also confirm the direction we’re going. The latest data reveal that gains are spread across all three participating districts, with all showing significant gains between the pre- and post-common assessment, as seen in Fig. 4. Thus teachers across districts were able to implement SUNBEAMS, with similar student gains.

The project evaluator’s FY 10 report states,

The student assessment data clearly indicate that students responded well to the implementation of SUNBEAMS content and methods in their classrooms with significant gains on both the common and choice assessments across districts. Teacher observations and student performance indicate that SUNBEAMS was highly successful in creating interest and achievement in science and math. Teachers are perhaps in the best position to determine if and to what extent students are learning. As demonstrated in the section above, participating teachers firmly believed SUNBEAMS would and did have a positive influence on student interest and achievement in math and science in their classrooms. This belief is substantiated by the student assessment data. During the course of the FY10 SUNBEAMS summer workshop, participants learned about the importance of pre- and

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**Fig. 3: Impact of SUNBEAMS Project, Post-Survey of Participants (FY 09)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about the impact of this program on your students?</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) My students are more attentive, enthusiastic, and involved in classroom activities …</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) The quality of student work is noticeably improved …</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) My students are participating in science and math activities outside of the classroom to a greater degree …</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
post-assessment in inquiry-based learning. They learned how to construct effective pre- and post-assessment tools, and they were asked to agree upon a common pre- and post-assessment tool, which they would give to their students prior to the February symposium. In addition, they were asked to construct a pre- and post-assessment tool of their own which they would utilize with their students. Once both sets of data were de-identified, participants submitted the pre- and post-scores to the evaluator. For the pre- and post-common assessment, there were 24 usable data sets, which represented a total of 480 students. The assessment was worth eight points, and teachers submitted identified pre- and post-data at the same time. A two-tailed t-test was performed in order to determine if student gains from pre- to post-were significant. Overall, students scored significantly higher on the post-test ($M = 7.04$, $SD = 1.24$) than on the pre-test ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.69$), $t(27.82), p = .0001$. The mean gain was 2.62 points, with a 95% confidence level between 2.44 to 2.81” (Fig. 5).

When asked what our “tipping point” was or the moment we realized that a real movement was happening, it wasn’t hard to determine those special moments, which we now share through stories and quotes.

- One school district established a SUNBEAMS lab room where teachers could leave materials set up and then use on a rotating basis to become more efficient and use less time in preparation and clean-up (following the Year 1 project).
• SUNBEAMS has become a “buzz” word in the school community and is referred to with pride and accomplishment by teachers and administrators.

• Teachers saw a new sense of excitement, discovery, and inquiry as children identified with the tie-dyed lab coats and the clues that science and math (SUNBEAMS) class was beginning.

• Participants’ electronic journal responses to the project evaluator included:
  - *This is the best workshop I have had in 25 years of teaching. I was getting very discouraged because I kept thinking, What happened to considering developmentally appropriate practices?*

  - *My students will be more engaged and will want to learn these new and fun ideas and activities centered on the SUNBEAMS units of nature study for science and math. They should retain more of the information presented. And when tested on the specific kindergarten standards, they should score higher and master these standards in science and math …*

  - *The Ruby Payne materials were informative and eye-opening. We are all dealing with diversity and poverty in varying degrees in our classrooms, and we need this information from Dr. Payne’s work to understand and deal with it appropriately.*
Implications

We believe that we have developed a valuable model for professional development that has potential for great positive impact on teacher quality improvement—and thus positive student learning outcomes as evidenced by four years of project data. In districts considered at-risk (poverty, diversity, linguistic challenges, and exceptionalities), teachers overwhelmingly report changes in their attitude and practices as a result of this professional development model.

Specifically in relation to our fourth goal, differentiating instruction for diverse populations, the participants’ comments demonstrate the importance of this professional development model in helping them accommodate differences and diversity in their classrooms and the positive effects this can have on their students’ learning. Since the grant was specifically designed for teachers of students of poverty populations, the “best practices” shared in the training were directly and indirectly influenced by such resources as Under-Resourced Learners: 8 Strategies to Boost Student Achievement (2008) by Dr. Ruby Payne.

This goal has been about helping participants understand how to differentiate instruction, attend to diversity in their student populations, and integrate cultural diversity into the curriculum. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data support the attainment of this goal. At the end of the workshop survey, 100% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that SUNBEAMS offered them “new understandings of how to differentiate [their] science and math curriculum,” with 90% strongly agreeing with the statement. In addition, 96.7% strongly agreed or agreed that SUNBEAMS offered them “new understanding about cultural diversity and how to address and include it in the curriculum.” Similar to previous years, when participants were asked to reflect on the ways in which SUNBEAMS influenced their attention to cultural diversity and its inclusion in the curriculum, they noted the ways in which the program had helped them differentiate and attend to the diverse populations they serve. Three comments from teachers follow:

• As a teacher in a culturally diverse district, I understand that research has proven that there are best practices for improving achievement for these students. These practices include: demonstration of high expectations, implementation of culturally relevant instruction, and establishment of caring relationships. The SUNBEAMS program assists the teacher in including each of these best practices in order to ensure that all students achieve, no matter their race.

• It [SUNBEAMS] has made me more aware of different learning modalities and has gotten me out of my comfort zone of teacher-directed learning. My students have come alive with their interest in science. I have also gotten more into science and want to do more with my kids. My kids have really gotten into the idea of seeing themselves as scientists. They know that when we are studying science we have to observe and listen; it has really gotten them to
slow down and pay attention to their surroundings.

- They [my students] are learning to appreciate the differences in each other and learning how to work together to complete a project.

Replication of this model in varied districts across other counties and states would be a natural next step. Generalizable to other content areas as well, the model of intensive, inquiry-based exploration of effective teaching models and methods—with formative support and yearlong check-ins (via symposiums)—is effective in helping teachers work successfully with diverse populations.

References


Nancy Varian, Ph.D., serves as director of the Center for Professional Development at Malone University, Canton, Ohio. She has taught classes and educational professional development while living in Mississippi; Washington, D.C.; and Ohio. Her interests lie in assisting teachers of culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged populations obtain the tools they need to help their students be successful in school and life. Dr. Varian has led groups of students in service/learning trips to Central America and South America, as well as Asia. She first became certified as a trainer with Dr. Ruby K. Payne in September 2006, with recertification in 2011.

Beth Clark-Thomas, Ph.D., serves as an education professor in the School of Education and Human Development and teaches current and future educators in models and methods of instruction at Malone University, Canton, Ohio. Previously she taught elementary school with diverse student populations in Houston, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; and northeastern Ohio. Her passion lies in reaching the students in meaningful ways to enhance the relevance of their learning experiences. Dr. Clark-Thomas, along with Dr. Varian, led a group of education students in a work project at a school in Quito, Ecuador, during spring break of 2012.
AFTER MANY YEARS in the college classroom, I have (finally) come to realize that students who come to me via generational poverty, or who are first-generation college students, or who have found their way into my classroom through other-than-traditional means require a different kind of approach on my part if they are to be successful. I once believed that this constituted sacrificing the standards and rigor that, by definition, make college college. But my experience—and some nonscientific experimentation—has led me to believe that, with a few simple adjustments, I can better reach these students without compromising academic integrity. Perhaps my most significant discovery has been the power of conferencing.

I have always believed in midterm conferences. I have for many years canceled my composition classes for one session and insisted that students come to my office and meet with me one on one. We discuss their grade and review any concepts necessary. But most important, I believe, is the two-way dialogue we have about their writing: which topics they have chosen to write about and why, their particular strategic plan, word choice, sentence structure, and organizational pattern. The result is often a significant improvement in their writing. My hypothesis has always been that after the conferences students know me on a more intimate level and feel less inclined to hide in the back of class. I now know more about what makes them tick. I know something of their personal
lives, their struggles, their transgressions, and such. For whatever reason, these conferences frequently turn into academic confessionals—and I believe that students are relieved by the catharsis—after which they write better because they do not want to embarrass themselves or, I hope, because they feel liberated and supported to take more creative risks. They feel less that I am judging them and more that I am guiding them.

But only recently, since becoming involved in the Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students (Becker, Krodel, & Tucker, 2009) movement, have I applied the potential of my conferencing model to students coming to me from generational poverty. These students have a particular set of issues that can be addressed via such conferencing. First, I find that these students are loath to visit faculty members in their offices. Such offices, to these students, represent authority, bureaucracy, “The Man.” Their experiences in offices are often connected to asking for aid, filling out forms, answering embarrassing questions, etc. They often slink into my office looking quite uneasy. So my first task is to put them at ease.

My initial move is to ditch the big, scary desk and sit next to the student in the same kind of chair. Second, I refer to my prewritten list of names and comments (if necessary) and toss in a compliment: “I appreciate your participation in class discussion,” or, “You are so punctual; don’t think I don’t notice that,” or, “I know this class really scares you, but you are facing it head on; good for you.”

Next, I show the students a summary of their progress in the course so far (see midterm conference report form on page 47). I highlight attendance and talk about its importance. I show them their grades (which are available on the class website, but seeing them in a hard copy that they can take with them makes it more real, which is especially important for students to whom education already seems too abstract). Then we talk about their current grade and formulate a plan for their final grade. I have come to believe that students who struggle with the abstractions of the college classroom particularly benefit from this. For example, if a student is currently in danger of failing, we look at the point spread and the remaining assignments, and we agree upon a plan of action. I write this down on the conference sheet, thereby creating a sort of academic contract. If the student does what is in this plan, he or she should pass the class. I find that this gives students who are easily demoralized renewed energy and hope. This is often the push these students need to see that success is possible and that it is in their control.

Next I ask students to discuss ideas for their upcoming research projects. We talk about what issues interest them, what they already know a great deal about, and what they would like to learn more about.
This back-and-forth conversation is often where students come to the realization that they do have areas of expertise that can be converted into a strong research project. During this part of the conference, I often have students who divulge stories of past transgressions, homelessness, suicide attempts, anorexia, court appearances, and much more. Quite often I am able to steer them toward writing about these issues which are so close to them. One recent student felt compelled to tell me about her past drug abuse and about running away from home at age 15. She told me that one day she realized what a wretched life she was leading and decided to make her way across the country to come home. Right there in my office she underwent an epiphany about that time in her life and decided to write about it. As a result, her paper was so powerful that I suggested she submit it for publication in our literary journal. It was accepted and, at the book release, she brought her whole family to share in her triumph. Nearly everyone at the reading teared up. This woman went on to earn an A in the course and is planning to expand her essay into a book. This type of dramatic development is not common, but it happens more than one would suspect.

Sometimes the conference time is taken up with one-on-one tutoring. If a student is having a particular problem with some concept in the course, we go over it and practice it in whatever way best suits that student. Thus, there is no need for these students to feel self-conscious in class.

One of the most remarkable outcomes of these conferences is that students’ apprehension is reduced. They now feel more comfortable with their writing. It is tangible to them. This conferencing model helped me realize that there are a number of other very practical, everyday techniques that help alleviate a great deal of the apprehension—sometimes outright fear—that under-resourced students experience. For example, I have learned via course exit surveys (see page 50) that my common practice of calling students “sir” and “ma’am” makes them feel as though I take them more seriously as students. They also quite appreciate it when I call them by name (I find this very important to students who already feel somewhat invisible or inadequate). I make it a practice to call them by their surnames, as in, “Yes, Miss Jenkins, you have a question?”

I also feel strongly that, as an instructor, it is my duty to elevate the discussion to a college level. In other words, it benefits no one to “dumb down” my lectures or the rigor of the workload. This can be achieved, I find, by parsing the workload more incrementally. I have an exercise in my first-year writing course in which I ask students to “build” their thesis statements step by step rather than simply assigning them to write a thesis statement. I give smaller, more focused quizzes, and I break down research projects into sections, with one part due at a time. Then we “sew” the parts together. Another trick is that I always deliver assignments in more than one format. Keeping in mind that some of these students are auditory learners, some are visual, and some are tactile, I verbally discuss a writing assignment, I hand it out in detailed written format, and I post it on the class website. I often also send everyone an email stressing key elements of
the assignment and reminding them what is due and when. My nearly 30 years of experience in the classroom has taught me that students coming from under-resourced backgrounds frequently have difficulty with time management, and these reminders are a simple way to assist them in developing better organizational habits.

I find that providing actual examples of the type of paper assigned alleviates a lot of apprehension about writing assignments. I do this in many classes that involve essay questions. If I provide an example of a good essay answer, with the key elements that make it a good answer marked, students often will model it and improve the level of their work. To this end I also issue lists of commonly used academic phrases as models for improvement. I also find that students respond with less trepidation if they have choices. I try to offer a variety of writing topics, letting them select the one that best “speaks” to them. Sometimes, on tests, I even allow students to “make their own” tests. After all, I’m trying to assess what they know, not “catch” them in what they do not know. For instance, I may offer five essay questions worth a total of 50 points and ask students to select the questions they feel most comfortable answering. Then I ask them to assign how many points they want each essay to be worth. I set parameters, of course, but this method allows students to “show off” how much they know about a given topic, which builds confidence.

My morale-boosting plan also involves seemingly innocuous comments during class discussion which I feel subliminally reinforce in students the idea that they do belong in the classroom and that they do have something to contribute. I frequently say, “As thinking, educated people, we know that . . .,” or, “It is obvious to us, because we are in the academic world, that . . .,” and sometimes I am more overt, saying, “We, as part of the college community, see these issues more clearly than some other people . . .” I staunchly believe that if I demonstrate my confidence in their ability, they will develop that confidence, and it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Also, I find that all students, and especially under-resourced students, need specific feedback on their work, both negative and positive. I find that providing a very specific rubric both before and after they complete an assignment provides them with good direction. It is very important for the rubric to indicate not just areas of evaluation but exact markings. I provide a list of “forbidden” words that I know weaken student work. I assign points for typing in the correct font and size, using the correct heading and pagination, I specify the penalty for not meeting the length requirement, and I make explicit other such mundane marks. Many of these are just checkmarks on the rubric sheet, but they guide students toward presenting a college-worthy paper and provide them with an understanding of the “hidden rules” of college classroom

“... providing a very specific rubric both before and after they complete an assignment provides them with good direction.”
practices. However, I find that positive feedback is just as important as clearly defined penalties. I try to challenge students early in the semester by teasing them with this goal: Only excellent work can receive the coveted “Wow” comment. I point out that it is given rarely and never out of obligation. I am constantly amazed at how much that one word means to students. I have seen faces light up when someone receives that little comment. I have seen fully grown men and women show the mark to nearby students and brag. Some even comment about it on the course exit survey.

Still another really basic but effective tool for easing under-resourced student apprehension is the first-session student information sheet (see page 48). I ask my students to complete this near the end of the first day of class, after I have explained the course, the rules, the expectations, and have gone over the syllabus. I ask for basic information, including good contact information, but then I ask some key questions: I ask about their previous experience in whatever I am teaching, usually composition or world literature, and how students feel about it. I ask them to list what they hope to gain from the course, to which many reply “a passing grade,” but often they provide some useful nuggets. Then I ask them to explain any potential personal obstacles to gaining the most from the course. I receive replies ranging from childcare issues to transportation problems to work concerns to “I’m, by nature, lazy.” Then I use this information (which I guarantee them is strictly confidential and will be shredded at the end of the term) to ferret out potential problems.

I might catch up with a student after class or during the break. I might email, call, or write a note on the first quiz. The key is to address the issue head on and talk it over.

I try to offer problem solving skills by asking questions such as, “What can you arrange as a backup in case your car doesn’t start, as you fear?” or, “Do you have someone you can call last minute to watch your child if your childcare provider can’t?” When these students do find that they cannot overcome such tyrannies of the moment, I try to offer alternatives. For instance, if I teach multiple sections of the course, I allow them to sit in on another section. I also try to set up a tutoring time or forward them the PowerPoint slides or handouts. I have a strict policy of never allowing missed classwork to be made up, but I stress that if arrangements are made in advance, I will work with students in a sticky situation. Again, students learn more of the hidden rules of college and are given the opportunity to take ownership of their own education. I also have students complete a class contact card (see page 49) on the first day and have them exchange these cards with other students. This guarantees that they have at least one person they can reach out to if they have a simple question or need basic assistance and do not feel comfortable contacting the instructor. But, more than that, it provides students a sense of belonging, a feeling that they are not alone. Often I have seen class contact cards bring students together, providing them with a friendly face to sit with, share break time with, or simply converse with about the issues of the moment.
Many of our students, not just those who are under-resourced, can benefit from these basic tactics. But I have discovered that if I concentrate on implementing them more directly, I can better reach this often struggling segment of the student population, and I can do so without sacrificing any of the standards of my class. In short, it’s a win-win proposition for everyone.
English 111 Midterm Conference Report

Date _______________

Name ________________________________________

Attendance: Number of sessions missed ________      Number of times tardy ______

Narrative paper grade ____ Strengths overall:
Revision statement ___
Comments:

Descriptive paper grade ___ Weaknesses overall:
Revision statement ___
Comments:

Definition paper grade ____ Estimated grade at midterm = ____________*
Revision statement___
Comments: Course plan:

Worksheets and quizzes:
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____
Name ____________________ Grade _____

* This does NOT imply the guarantee of a grade. It is only an estimate as of this date.
Student Information Form  Circle Course Number  111  112

Name ______________________________

Nickname or preferred name ______________________________

City or town _____________________ State ________

Telephone ____________________ Alternate _____________________

Email _______________________________________

1. What is your background or experience in writing?

2. What do you hope to gain from this class?

3. What, if any, potential obstacles do you anticipate could interfere with your success in this class?

4. Is there anything else the instructor should know about you in order to better meet your needs as a student?

I, __________________________, have been given a syllabus and rules for this course. I understand them and agree to follow them. Date ________________

For research purposes only (optional): Are you a first-generation college student? _______
Class Contact Card

Fill out this card and exchange with a classmate so you can have a contact to let you know what you missed if you are ever absent from class. All information is completely optional.

Name ______________________    Course day and time _________________
Phone ______________________    FYI _________________________________
Cell ________________________
Email ______________________

Class Contact Card

Fill out this card and exchange with a classmate so you can have a contact to let you know what you missed if you are ever absent from class. All information is completely optional.

Name ______________________    Course day and time _________________
Phone ______________________    FYI _________________________________
Cell ________________________
Email ______________________

Class Contact Card

Fill out this card and exchange with a classmate so you can have a contact to let you know what you missed if you are ever absent from class. All information is completely optional.

Name ______________________    Course day and time _________________
Phone ______________________    FYI _________________________________
Cell ________________________
Email ______________________
English 111 Course Evaluation

In order to assist the instructor in delivering the best educational experience possible to future students, please answer this evaluation honestly. Student feedback is crucial in developing courses, instruction, content, etc. This is NOT an official college document, but answers and comments will be kept confidential. Do NOT write your name on this evaluation. Thank you.

Answers: 5 = excellent        4 = very good          3 = good          2 = poor          1 = very poor

1. The instructor started class on time all or most of the time. _____

2. The instructor made clear what was to be covered in each class session. _____

3. The instructor provided a syllabus for the course which accurately outlined what was covered throughout the semester. _____

4. The instructor maintained accurate attendance and grade records. _____

5. I felt comfortable with the portfolio method of evaluating my writing. _____

6. Lectures were helpful and constructive to my becoming a better writer. _____

7. Readings were interesting and instructive. _____

8. I liked the themed approach to the course. _____

9. Handouts were helpful. _____

10. Quizzes and worksheets were helpful in checking my understanding of the material covered. _____

11. The instructor was regularly available to answer questions or to tutor me (either in person, on the phone, or via email). _____

12. The instructor kept regular office hours for assisting me when needed. _____

13. The instructor was easy to approach if I had an issue. _____
References


R. H. Nicholson teaches English at Ivy Tech Community College in Lawrenceburg, Indiana. He holds a bachelor's degree in English and journalism from Indiana State University and an M.A. in English from Butler University. After 28 years teaching in the high school classroom and 15 years teaching college part-time, he moved full-time into the college classroom in 2010 and became involved in the Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students program after being asked to represent his campus at the national convention. Nicholson has since become an advocate for faculty adapting their teaching methods to better reach students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
THE INVOLVEMENT of Hancock County in northwestern Ohio with Bridges Out of Poverty began as many communities do—a training. Consultant and author Terie Dreussi-Smith, who in 1999 had co-authored *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities* with Ruby Payne and Phil DeVol, provided a two-day training session in March 2009 with more than 140 people in attendance.

After the training, those who wanted to continue to be active in the initiative were asked to sign up to attend a follow-up meeting. Thirty people indicated they were interested. The follow-up meeting resulted in the realization that there were many differing opinions and a multitude of options available. This led to more meetings. Over the course of one year, several ideas emerged that seemed important, yet daunting, to those involved. The idea of hiring a coordinator became the focus.

Thirteen months after Dreussi-Smith’s training, Hancock County officially hired me as full-time coordinator for its Bridges® Initiative. I was asked to focus in three directions:

1) Offer ongoing training sessions for the general community
2) Offer Getting Ahead™ (DeVol, 2006) classes on a regular basis
3) Develop a pool of “allies” to work with the graduates of Getting Ahead

With someone focused on the “programming” aspects of the initiative, the Guiding Coalition was asked to identify community issues that affected those in poverty and begin to create plans to address those is-

Achieving Our Vision: How Hancock County Chose a Direction for Its Bridges Work

by Carol Taylor
sues. With members of the Guiding Coalition increasingly feeling as though agency and staff were “taking care” of things, meetings of the coalition soon became update-only sessions. Attendance began to dwindle, and the power of many perspectives at the table was lost.

The Challenge

“This work is organic.” These four words became our catch phrase as we delved deeper into the Bridges (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) constructs. Many of us in Hancock County were attracted to Bridges work because of the freedom to apply the constructs to approaches that would be accepted by and benefit our local community. That same freedom also led us to take on a large number of issues at once, resulting in no discernible changes, high levels of frustration, and the potential for broken relationships. The need to produce outcomes quickly for grantors, coupled with the complexity of poverty, resulted in spending many hours “doing good works” and tracking data without knowing if it would be useful or not. A definitive direction was needed.

The Plan

As coordinator, I started where so many begin—asking professionals in other counties how they make it happen. Phone and face-to-face consultation, Internet searches, book reading, and brainstorming sessions with supervisors and Getting Ahead graduates consistently pointed to the same answer: We needed a committed team to guide the initiative and a strategic plan that everyone could buy into.

We knew our county could successfully collaborate if the issue were clearly identified. Tapping my experience with facilitating collaboration, we began to identify key sectors of our community to be included on a Leadership Team. We quickly realized, however, that the Leadership Team would include more than 30 people using this approach. Instead, we identified key leaders in our community who showed a deep understanding of poverty and the Bridges constructs. The result was 11 individuals from a complete cross-section of our community, all of whom had great passion and leadership ability.

We developed a general idea of the roles of the Leadership Team, as well as the other teams that would become a part of the overall Guiding Coalition for our initiative (Fig. 1).
Guiding Coalition Structure

We used the mental model in Fig. 1 to explain the structure and role of the Leadership Team as we met with each prospective member individually. We asked that each individual commit two years to the process. Within one month, we had a Leadership Team of two representatives from higher education (two different community colleges in the Findlay area), two representatives from the business community, one representative from the faith community, a representative from our local Community Foundation, one city councilman (also the executive director of the Agency on Aging), two Getting Ahead graduates, the Bridges coordinator, and the assistant director of the fiscal agency in the Bridges initiative.

During our first meeting, members of the Leadership Team decided that we would engage in a formal strategic planning process with a local expert organization. We received funding for the process from our local Community Foundation and began meeting with a consultant. Using the ex-
pertise, technology, and experience of Six Disciplines of Northwest Ohio, Inc., we developed the necessary structure for our plan: (a) Mission Statement, (b) Vision Statement, (c) Value Statements, and (d) four Vital Few Objectives.

**The Tool**

Our formal session was five hours long, involving a series of four “100-point exercises” guided by the consultant and laptop-based technology. For each exercise we were asked to brainstorm on a topic for 5–10 minutes, with the consultant typing our thoughts into a computer program. At the conclusion of the brainstorming time, the consultant would download the typed statements to each individual’s laptop. We were then given 100 “points” to spend in 20-point increments on the statements we each felt were most important. Once we had all completed our point “spending,” the consultant would download a graph of everyone’s answers to one table (Fig. 2).

**Vision**

Exercise—PW-287  
100-Point Results  
Bridges 2012 Vision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>EP</th>
<th>Juli</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>Jen</th>
<th>SCarol</th>
<th>Trev</th>
<th>Kyle</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Bridge the benefits cliff/gap</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Have documented systems and procedures for key processes</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Licensed Bridges site</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>Grad on every non-profit board in the community</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>02</td>
<td>Have companies in the area with a commitment to hire graduates</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Have grads as Allies</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Have 2 Allies for every Getting Ahead grad</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0</td>
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Fig. 2
## Mission

Exercise—PW-284
100-Point Results
Bridges 2012 Mission: Why do we exist? What is our purpose?

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<th>Description</th>
<th>Kyle</th>
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<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>Jen S</th>
<th>Carol</th>
<th>John U</th>
<th>Trevo</th>
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<td>01</td>
<td>Foster human potential</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</table>

Fig. 3

## Values

Exercise—PW-285
100-Point Results
Bridges 2012 Values: What are our behaviors? What is our culture?

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<th>Description</th>
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<th>P</th>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Carol</th>
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<th>Kyle</th>
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<tr>
<td>01</td>
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<td>07</td>
<td>Community accountability—it takes a village</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4
The team could then see the items that rose to the top as most important. This process was completed by the team for all stages of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, the Vision Statement, the Mission Statement, and the Values statements (some shown above). Based on the outcomes of the 100-point exercises, the team selected four Vital Few Objectives (VFOs) as a focus over the course of the next 1–3 years in the areas of (1) financial, (2) clients, (3) service delivery, and (4) staff/volunteers/board (Fig. 3).

### Goal Spreadsheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>2012 Target</th>
<th>YTD Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VFO1: Grow revenue</td>
<td>Maintain funding stream</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>&lt;insert #&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients (Those We Provide Service To, Financial Supporters)</td>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>2012 Target</td>
<td>YTD Actual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO2: Retain and grow our pool of Allies</td>
<td>Number of Allies</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE 1: Develop Ally recruitment program (Owner: Julie Brown)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Retain and grow our pool of Allies</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Have a recognizable recruitment program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO3: Have measurable changes in grads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE 1: Increase resources of Getting Ahead grads</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Grads will increase their knowledge of Hidden Rules</td>
<td>Increased knowledge</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Grads will increase their Financial Resources</td>
<td>Increased financial resources</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Grads will increase their Supports</td>
<td>Increased supports</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Delivery</td>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>2012 Target</td>
<td>YTD Actual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO5: Have documented processes and procedures</td>
<td>Number of procedures/month</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE 2: Create system to develop processes and procedures (Owner: Carol Taylor)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: 4 Procedures completed per month</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO6: Have meaningful quantifiable metrics</td>
<td>Have a scorecard</td>
<td>By 3/31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE 3: Create the Balanced Scorecard (Owner: Jen Swartzlander)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Have meaningful quantifiable objectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Have metrics influencing decision makers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff/Volunteers/Board</td>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>2012 Target</td>
<td>YTD Actual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO7: Retain high-quality staff</td>
<td>Staff turnover</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFO8: Retain high-quality Guiding Coalition</td>
<td>Fully staffed coalition</td>
<td>By 6/30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE 4: Develop Guiding Coalition Recruitment Program (Owner: John Urbanski)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Have complete Guiding Coalition (up to 10 members)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome: Have a succession plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5
Three of the four VFOs had initiatives that needed to be completed as well. Committees, including members of the Leadership Team and additional key community members, were developed for each initiative, with a member of the Leadership Team assigned ownership. During each Leadership Team meeting, the owner would give an update on the progress of his/her respective initiative.

Additionally, members of the Leadership Team volunteered to take the brainstormed statements and form a complete Vision statements, Mission Statement, and Values statements. Those statements are now approved and are being used as the guiding forces for all decisions made within the Bridges work.

**Vision:**

**Be**
- A catalyst for community change
- The respected voice of poverty
- Fiscally sustainable

**Have**
- Professional, highly-trained, well-supported staff and volunteers
- Critical mass of community members who understand and utilize Bridges Out of Poverty constructs in their personal and professional decision making

**Do**
- Increase meaningful opportunities for individuals in poverty to become prosperous
- Bring various sectors of the community together to develop measurable solutions to poverty in Hancock County
- Provide intentional programming that addresses absences of human and social capital, human exploitation, political/economic structures and behaviors of the individual
- Facilitate innovative community solutions

**Mission:**

“We are committed to creating sustainable community solutions to poverty by collaboratively fostering human potential through trusting relationships, empowerment and education.”

**Values:**

- Humility—a belief that you are not superior to others exhibited through actions of respect and care
- Integrity—having the courage to do the right thing by modeling honesty and truthfulness
- Respect—holding others in high regard
- Human dignity—a belief that all people have inherent inalienable natural and legal rights
The Result

It is important to note that throughout the strategic planning process, I continued to provide training sessions and offer Getting Ahead classes. We have been transparent with our local grantors about the process and have reduced the projected number of people we will serve in 2012 so that we can focus further on building a strong structure and foundation on which to move forward.

We now have a recruitment and retention plan in place that contains input from Getting Ahead graduates and allies—and we are nearing completion of the Guiding Coalition recruitment plan. We have written procedures for training sessions, Getting Ahead enrollment, ally involvement, and job descriptions for all volunteer positions.

Most importantly, we have a vision that was developed collaboratively, is supported by key leaders in our community, and serves as the filter for all new ideas that are generated to address poverty in our county. We no longer respond to every suggestion with time, money, and energy resources. Rather, we carefully select the activities that utilize our precious resources by weighing them against our agreed-upon Vision, Mission, and Values.

Lessons Learned

“This work is organic.” Without direction and careful planning, a county will find itself utilizing very limited resources in activities that are unlikely to produce long-lasting change. The initiative needs direction.

Six Disciplines of Northwest Ohio gave us a skeleton. It’s now a matter of continued commitment, communication, and accountability. It has taken regularly scheduled Leadership Team meetings, as well as committee meetings for several months, in order to put the full process in place.

Transparency, communication, leadership, and collaboration have been critical. Remember, it’s all about relationships.

References


Carol Taylor, a native of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, attended the University of Findlay, then began a 16-year career in children’s mental health services. After participating in a Bridges Out of Poverty training in 2009, she was determined to spread the word about Bridges constructs. Taylor became a certified trainer that same year and launched a new career working to alleviate poverty in the Hancock County area. Taylor continues to reside in Findlay with her pets where she is active in her congregation and is pursuing her master’s degree.
IN 2007 NEW YORK STATE’S hospital closure commission (the Berger Commission) mandated the merger of Schenectady’s three hospitals into one. During the ensuing five years, a broad community coalition has used the “Bridges®” (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) lens to enhance access to healthcare services, leading to measurable improvements in community health and positioning Schenectady as a leader in healthcare innovation.

The forced consolidation of the three hospitals, which was accomplished in less than a year, left Ellis Medicine, the non-profit owner of the single remaining acute-care hospital (and, suddenly, also one of the community’s largest primary-care providers) with de facto responsibility for the health and wellness of all the county’s 150,000 people.

James W. Connolly, the new president and CEO of the newly consolidated hospital (he had interviewed for his job on the day the Berger Commission issued its report), called the recognition of that responsibility “an epiphany.” As the only place that the community’s substantial uninsured and underinsured population can go for care, Connolly said, “The hospital has two choices. You can wait until people get sick and come to the Emergency Department for very expensive care, or you can get out into the community and promote cost-effective wellness and primary care. Either way, you pay for it.” And paying for it was a valid concern in a community where the three hospitals lost a combined $7 million in the year preceding consolidation.
While the hospitals undertook the complex process of merging systems and staffs (and eliminating beds), Ellis commissioned a local college to conduct a telephone survey identifying the community’s healthcare concerns. At the top of the list were: (1) access to care for the uninsured, (2) availability of urgent care, and (3) transportation to care.

With these concerns in mind—and faced with the need to stem the flow of red ink that threatened the very existence of the only remaining healthcare resource—hospital and community leaders convened an informal task force to develop a fast response. This led to a three-pronged approach to meeting the community’s health needs.

**First** was a physical modification. One of the former hospitals—located adjacent to the neighborhood with the lowest incomes and highest healthcare needs in the city—was converted to an outpatient facility; the Ellis Health Center (EHC). Patients gained “one stop” access to lab testing, X-rays and imaging, cancer screening, diabetes and asthma education, nutritional counseling, primary care, pediatric care, dental care, and outpatient mental health clinics. The campus’ 24/7 Emergency Department (ED) remained open. Going beyond just healthcare services, community partners opened a farmers’ market, free income-tax services, a bereavement counseling center, and the school district’s new student “welcome center” at EHC. In order to help patients get to the facility, Ellis implemented a free “community shuttle,” using an existing van and driver to make stops at seven community sites (including homeless housing providers, soup kitchens, and mental health providers) and then bring patients to EHC. [See “Community Shuttle Volumes” chart at end of article.] After receiving care, patients are given a free bus pass (purchased by the hospital, but at a bulk rate discount provided by the local transit authority) to get back home.

**Second** came a change in staffing. The hospital and community agencies partnered to place “navigators” at EHC to help patients find their way around the maze of healthcare and community services. Two “health services navigators”—one a nurse employed by the hospital and one a public health nurse under contract from the county Public Health Service—now help patients with healthcare, from selecting a primary care provider to understanding their medications to literally finding their way to an office at EHC. A “community services navigator” (a social worker employed by the local community action agency under a federal grant) helps with non-health services, such as finding housing or transportation. And “facilitated enrollers” from a non-profit health plan assist eligible patients with signing up for Medicaid.

The **third** change—affirmatively bringing Schenectady’s healthcare, community service, and local government agencies together as a “Bridges Community”—has tied together the participants in a “common language” of effectively coordinated services intended to meet the specific needs of each member of the community. Spurred by Michael Saccocio, executive
director of the Schenectady City Mission, implementation of the “Bridges” model throughout Schenectady rests on four pillars.

One pillar is the commonality of language. “Bridges” concepts are formally taught to hospital staff—including doctors, nurses, and administrators—as well as to staff of the many participating community agencies. Using formal training at many levels, the goal is to hard-wire Bridges thinking throughout Schenectady’s healthcare and community service agencies. A hospital staff member completed the formal “train the trainer” program and is now qualified as a Bridges expert. Using the hospital’s training facilities, she and other community professionals teach Bridges concepts in a two-day, seven-student course every other month—with the “graduates” continuing to meet monthly to discuss how they are implementing what they learned. In addition, required continuing education for hospital executives includes coursework in the Bridges process. And these executive “trainees” experience what they are learning. After a group of healthcare managers exploring city bus routes missed a connection and had to walk half a mile in the bitter cold, local medical practices suddenly became more tolerant of patients who were a bit late for appointments.

A second pillar is a greater awareness of what makes the local community special—and therefore requires special responses. Schenectady hosts a substantial West Indian community, largely the result of affirmative outreach by a previous mayor who welcomed secondary migration of Guyanese immigrants from New York City. Census data show that this initiative reversed the central city’s population decline; the data also project that future growth will enhance Schenectady’s diversity, with the “Asian” (the U.S. Census category for West Indians) population growth outpacing any other population group in both absolute numbers and relative share. But the medical community’s growing awareness of local population dynamics led to a discovery beyond the demographics: the need for medical care that isn’t just culturally appropriate but with particular understanding of population genetics. In this case, research conducted at Ellis identified an unexpectedly high prevalence of diabetes in West Indian men, especially those without such a typical indicator as obesity. The West Indian community mobilized behind community-service and faith-based organizations; the county Public Health Service obtained a federal grant; and medical practitioners are now routinely screening for, and identifying diabetes in, patients who would not previously have been considered candidates for screening.

As a side note, active involvement of the West Indian community with the healthcare system has led to increased interest in, and opportunities for, employment. As of 2012, the workforce at Ellis Medicine is more diverse than the population of its service area (17% people of color vs. 12% for the population), with more than 40% of the minority employees in the “Asian” category.
The third “Bridges” pillar is a new predilection toward cooperation, both within and among communities. The informal group that helped envision the outpatient facility and its staffing model of navigators has become a formal advisory group and “think tank,” tying the hospital and a multitude of community groups together. Individual partners have built direct linkages, such as a four-way partnership among two children’s service organizations that identify clients needing dental care and two dental clinics (Ellis Medicine and Home-town Health, the federally qualified health center), which provide pediatric dental care based on their specialties and capacities. When New York State offered Medicaid funding for community-based care management programs called “Health Homes,” 30 providers and community organizations signed on as partners, and Schenectady was chosen as one of only two upstate communities to participate in the first phase of the Health Homes project. And, when the Medicare Community-based Care Transitions Program (CCTP) solicited applications from large regional coalitions, Schenectady’s partnership was the logical leader of what became collaboration among 10 hospitals and six community-based organizations serving 21% of the geography of New York State.

The final pillar is the most important for the future: use of the “Bridges lens” to look at what we do every day. This concept ensures that the community’s viewpoint is always “at the table” during the decision-making process so that, just as the chief financial officer (CFO) may express the fiscal viewpoint and the chief nursing officer (CNO) expresses the nursing viewpoint, a designated community-based executive understands and puts forward the views and needs of the community. As a result, the goal is that new programs should be designed to fit everyone’s needs—perhaps by ensuring understandable reading materials or by locating new facilities on a convenient bus route. And while the “Bridges lens” is not the only way of looking at an issue, just as the financial perspective is not the only way to look at healthcare, having a strong voice for that view substantially increases the potential that the final decision also will benefit the community.

This integration into community thinking is well illustrated by the “aha” moment that took place as a group of hospital administrators were gathered to hear from a national speaker on the Bridges process. During the follow-up discussion, participants talked about transportation issues (some of them had been part of the group that missed the bus and had to walk) and about their efforts to accommodate patients who came late for an appointment. Some of the patients even came on the wrong day or week because of multiple issues—from transportation to childcare to dealing with family crises—which make it difficult to come to a specific place at a specific time. Starting with stories about working medical schedules around patients’ appearances (one dental technician routinely “hijacked” dental residents to treat patients without appointments but in obvious pain), the group began to ask why we need appointments at all. Rather than require patients to do what may be difficult or impossible, why not organize the care and treatment process around
what patients can do? This is now leading to several forms of experimentation. Hometown Health sets aside several time slots daily for walk-ins, as do the Ellis clinics, which maintain open slots coinciding with the arrival of the community shuttle van. The Ellis dental clinic is investigating the possibility of dedicating one day a month for open treatment of the parents who accompany their children for pediatric dental care. And the full array of outpatient services at EHC might be made “open access” for some uniform period weekly or monthly so that patients without appointments would know that they can come for any care they need during that open period.

It should be noted that implementation of a new way of thinking did not come painlessly to Schenectady, nor is the Schenectady experience always directly applicable to other communities.

The “crisis” that brought the community together—closure of two hospitals—was resisted at the time—and the succeeding steps would not have happened without the outside intervention of the state’s hospital closure commission. But once the hospital closures actually occurred, the Schenectady response/model of integrated care has spread rapidly in the region: The two hospitals in Amsterdam, immediately to the west of Schenectady, merged in 2009; and three hospital systems in Albany and Troy, to the east, are now in the process of merging. Those communities are using many of Schenectady’s strategies as they move forward with their new realities.

Although Schenectady’s size (the city’s population is about 60,000, the county’s is about 150,000, and the county is geographically the second smallest upstate) limited the number of competing social services and healthcare agencies to begin with, the creation of the single hospital’s “monopoly” (combined with the “monopoly” of the county Department of Social Services as the sole Medicaid payor) was a factor in inducing organizations to work together. Here again, cooperation seems contagious; the “Health Home” partnership includes a number of large, regionally based agencies that are working closely with each other and with smaller Schenectady-based groups.

So far, management efficiencies and economies of scale resulting from the hospital consolidation have helped to pay for many of the direct costs of the community-based services. Ellis receives no insurance or government reimbursement for such costs as the salaries of the navigators or the expenses of the community shuttle van. This may not be viable for the long haul; however, continuing cuts in both Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement levels are substantially reducing funds available to the hospital for investment in the community. Increasingly, the hospital and community coalitions are working together to submit combined grant applications, but to date they have limited experience and results.

There is positive experience in Schenectady with measurable outcomes from the overall changes in the community’s approach to healthcare. The nationally recognized “County Health Rankings” proj-
ect funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shows Schenectady’s steady progression of improved health outcomes over the three years (2010–12) that the rankings have been published. In the first year, Schenectady ranked 37th healthiest among New York’s 62 counties, moved up to 34th in 2010, and continued up to 30th for 2012. Other more specific measures also show progress. For example, the percentage of uninsured patients treated at the EHC ED declined from 20% to 18%, indicating that more patients are enrolling in Medicaid. The number of patients receiving primary care in the community has increased—with a 25% increase in patient volume at the Ellis primary care clinics between 2009 and 2011. Further, a process in which ED discharge nurses directly make follow-up appointments at the EHC clinic for ED patients who don’t have a primary-care physician has led more than 300 people to establish primary care for the first time. [See “Cumulative Ellis Health Center Emergency Department Referrals to Family Health Center” chart.]

The organizations also have been successful in leveraging their partnerships and combined resources for successful grant applications. The Health Home project will bring new capitated Medicaid payments to at least a half-dozen agencies that are directly delivering care management services. The federal REACH (Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) grant to the Schenectady County Public Health Service is supporting substantial research and outreach by multiple community members of the West Indian Diabetes Coalition, and it’s forming the basis for other research grant applications. Too, the Medicare CCTP could generate $6 million over five years to support care transitions services by the six community-based organizations and 10 hospitals.

There is a great deal of opportunity in healthcare to do things differently. Pretty much everybody in the system—or who observes the system—says that major elements of healthcare are “broken.” And this means that there is relatively little risk in trying new things. The worst that can happen is that the system will remain “broken,” while any improvement is a step in the right direction. The goal and the lesson of this initiative, of which Bridges concepts have been key elements, have been the value of understanding the needs of the community, using a comprehensive and consistent “lens” to ensure that those needs are always considered, and always including representatives of the community as voices “at the table” in the course of everyday business.

As a result, those of us who live and work in the Schenectady area are better able to meet the healthcare and community service needs of the diverse array of people in our community.
Community Shuttle Volumes

(by calendar quarter)
Cumulative Ellis Health Center ED Referrals to Family Health Center

Cumulatively, 343 patients who did not previously have a Primary Care Physician have established care at the Family Health Center
Kellie Valenti is vice president for Strategic Planning and Program Development at Ellis Medicine in Schenectady, New York. She was a member of the Transition Team that united Schenectady’s three hospitals and is now responsible for coordinating all aspects of organizational and strategic planning for the hospital, in addition to supporting new program and service-line development. Valenti earned her bachelor’s degree from Siena College and a master’s degree in Business Administration, with a focus on Healthcare Administration, from Union Graduate College. She is also a Fellow with the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE). Valenti is among Business Review’s 2010 “40 Under Forty” honorees.

Reference

Framework 21 Dedication

Dr. Paul Slocumb

Thank you for your tireless service in the field of gifted education, for giving me a different idea to take home to think about, and for your encouragement to develop that idea into a successful best practice.

As I began writing this article, I reflected back to the introduction of this best-practices idea, how it connected with me and made sense to me, and how it gave me something else to take home to think about besides routine teacher homework (see quote on next page). A tiny seed was sown by one of the most prudent, creative, and experienced educators—the late Dr. Paul D. Slocumb. His generosity in sharing his educational expertise helped me nurture that small seed into a flourishing, successful best practice that has had an indelible impact on my career as an educator and has forever changed the way I present learning experiences to high-ability and gifted students. I hope it also has influenced my students for the better.

It was Dr. Slocumb’s dream to see his list of what he called universal concepts come alive and to share curricular ideas and resources in conjunction with A Framework for Understanding Poverty (Payne, 2005) that would assist teachers in their quest to artistically and scientifically teach the whole child. I honor his memory with this article by citing his impact on me and by utilizing his work on the Heuristic Curriculum Model, even as his work on giftedness in poverty continues to be shared more widely.

–Teresa A. Johnson, Ed.D.
Introduction

“I like a teacher who gives me something else to take home to think about besides homework.”

–Lily Tomlin as “Edith Ann” (Quote Garden, 2012)

This is my Favorite Quote. Even though it is a quote from a fictional character, I feel it makes a powerful statement about teaching and learning, particularly in relation to high-ability and gifted learners. In the literature of many renowned educators, who have studied and worked with high-ability and gifted learners, I have found many recommendations that these learners be given something else to think about through meaningful learning experiences; training that teaches them to see the whole picture; and challenges that require deep, critical thought. Consider the following counsel from experienced educators:

a) Benjamin Franklin once wrote that children should learn things likely to be most useful (Hayes, 2006).

b) Tomlinson (1997) notes that high-ability and gifted learners need time for in-depth exploration, they must be cultivated to reach their highest potential, and they must be taught well and taught a curriculum that would be meaningful to their lives.

c) Slocumb and Payne (2000) state that high-ability and gifted learners need to think at higher levels and indepen-
d) Cloud (2007) writes that advanced learners must be taught to see the big picture, think at levels that encourage a deeper understanding, and develop critical-thinking skills.

e) Wiggins and McTighe (2005) state that teachers must give time to aligning curriculum with state standards, identifying big ideas, creating essential questions, designing more authentic assessments, and developing plans to teach for understanding in engaging ways.

Teachers must provide as high a level of intervention for high-ability and gifted learners as they do for at-risk or below-basic learners. This article introduces a framework that encompasses teaching and learning experiences that meet the needs of 21st-century, high-ability, and gifted learners, as well as average learners. Additionally, this essay recounts my experiences developing, implementing, analyzing, and evaluating this best practice.

A New Idea

In August of the 1999–2000 school year, a colleague recommended me for the district gifted program. I accepted the challenge and, at the end of the third week of school, I left the regular program for a career in gifted education. That year my teaching assignment was with elementary enrichment and gifted students, and that year was also the beginning of a significant paradigm shift for me in teaching style.

At the beginning of my second school year in the gifted program (2000–01), my teaching assignment shifted to more of a focus on middle school gifted. I also was asked by the district special education supervisor to attend the aha! Process workshops that provided training information for understanding poverty. The school district where I worked sought Unitary Status from a desegregation lawsuit filed in 1963 and wanted to develop the intellectual gifts of students from other cultures, as well as students who came from impoverished, low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Cheshier, 2007). With a majority student population that came from working-class and impoverished environments (approximately 70%), the school district realized it needed assistance in identifying and providing advanced curricula for gifted learners from environments with few resources or experiences. The district special education supervisor, an instructional supervisor, and I became the first three trainers on A Framework for Understanding Poverty (Payne, 1998) for the school district. During our training sessions, we were introduced to a new identification system for gifted learners from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, which the school district implemented. That gifted identification process, which the district named Project Explore, was developed in the book Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty (2000) by the late Paul D. Slocumb, Ed.D., and Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., senior consultants at aha! Process. Project Explore
began as a program that focused on environmental opportunities of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. An alternative curriculum was designed to meet their needs and also explore skills that would move them into gifted education. *Project Explore* classes were placed in our district’s four elementary schools with the highest poverty rates.

As I became more familiar with the information and materials from aha! Process, conducted more district training sessions, and became more familiar with Dr. Slocumb and his work with high-ability and gifted learners, Dr. Slocumb and I began to have regular discussions about advanced learners and curricula, especially curricula for students being pulled out of the regular classroom for special education services. As our school district’s assigned consultant for gifted education, Dr. Slocumb expressed concern with the randomness, level of challenge, and rigor of some of the units in the gifted curriculum. He felt some units provided enjoyable and enriching experiences for gifted learners, particularly younger learners. The accompanying lessons, however, provided few connections to overarching themes and provided little opportunity for students in upper elementary and middle grades to develop portfolios of authentically based, original projects. Such projects would expose and introduce them to skills most likely useful in honors and advanced-placement classes in higher grades—and also expose them to skills useful in work and life.

During one of our district’s workshops on poverty, Dr. Slocumb presented a section on using powerful themes to provide connections for high-ability and gifted learners. He outlined how a *universal theme* such as *symbols* could be used to span disciplines. For example, the teacher could begin with *concrete symbols* (in such core subjects as English and Math) like punctuation and operation symbols (?, !, =, +, %), then expand that concept to more *abstract symbols* with such subjects as Reading and Social Studies. The mockingbird, for example, could be seen as a symbol of senseless injustices in Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the bald eagle could be seen as symbolizing strength, courage, and freedom in the United States of America. That was an “aha” moment for me, as that example on symbols connected and made sense. In my mind, the main goal of the gifted teacher was to move learners from the concrete to the abstract through powerful connections. That day I took something else home to think about—a new idea! I began to think the district gifted curriculum would be more powerful, particularly for middle school advanced learners, if there were connections to standards and core subjects, along with differentiated, authentic, and hands-on learning experiences through powerful themes.

“...Dr. Slocumb presented a section on using powerful themes to provide connections for high-ability and gifted learners.”
Since our district desired to improve the gifted program from the identification process to curriculum design, Dr. Slocumb approached me as district trainer to develop a curriculum framework based on themes to pilot in the middle schools I served. He also asked me to return to *Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty* and reread Chapter 8 titled “Curriculum for the Gifted from Poverty” (Slocumb & Payne, 2000). Upon reading and studying this chapter, I met with Dr. Slocumb several times to discuss the theme-based curriculum idea in more depth. He provided me with a list of 26 themes that he called *universal concepts*, as well as information about how to use the concepts in the classroom. I took that information and the information from *Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty* and spent the next five years expanding the list of themes, developing and piloting thematic units that coincided with many of the *universal concepts* I felt would be beneficial and meaningful to high-ability and gifted learners—and would improve their overall achievement.

**A State Mandate**

In 2006 the State of Tennessee launched a program called the Tennessee Diploma Project (TDP) that endorsed support for a differentiated curriculum design and incorporation of current best practices in Tennessee classrooms. Teachers in my school district were encouraged to develop and incorporate alternative strategies in their classrooms that would challenge students; develop critical-thinking, creative-thinking, and problem-solving skills; improve achievement gains; and move students from a mostly independent environment to a more team-oriented, interdependent environment, particularly advanced-ability learners with achievement scores in the fourth and fifth quintiles. Administrative staff also encouraged the school district’s gifted program to serve as an additional intervention for gifted students and asked gifted staff, particularly middle school gifted staff, to redesign the curriculum to focus on:

- Standards and student performance indicators (SPIs)
- A higher level of challenge and rigor
- Higher order thinking strategies
- Cooperative and collaborative learning skills
- Authentically based, real-world tasks
- Units of study that would motivate and engage
- Units of study that would be beneficial and meaningful in future grades, vocational pursuits, and life itself

*Note. Personal communication, administrative staff, West Tennessee School District, 2007.*

The school district’s recommendation of a differentiated, standards-based curriculum design was based in part on data from the 2006 and 2007 Tennessee Value Added Assessment Summary Report (TVAAS). According to the TVAAS Summary Report for 2007 (Tennessee State Department of Education), results for the school district showed a decline in academic gains for the fourth and fifth quintile groups in grades 5–8. Additionally, parents of mid-
dle school high-ability and gifted students and middle school principals expressed concerns regarding (1) the level of challenge and rigor in the gifted curriculum design and (2) the relevancy of some of the units of study in the gifted curriculum (just as Dr. Slocumb expressed) in relation to educational preparation for the university-path curriculum in high school, for future work environments, and for life.

Note. Personal communication, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team meetings, 2006–08.

Moreover, state teacher-effect data showed a large gap between the bottom and top third student groups. Teachers were teaching standards, as there were big gains in the bottom third of students each year. High-ability and gifted students, however, showed minimal to no gains in the top third of teacher-effect data. This was another “aha” moment for me because similar information Dr. Slocumb shared with me was being highly recommended by the state. Based on these data and district requests, I became more serious and passionate about developing the universal concept idea into a framework that focused on the whole child and included aspects of the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. I wanted to scientifically test my framework concept in order to determine the impact on achievement, motivation, and interest, as well as on higher order thinking ability with high-ability and gifted students involved in a pullout gifted program.

In 2007, with Dr. Slocumb’s encouragement and recommendation, I pursued further educational training to field-test my projected framework.

### The Curriculum Framework Challenge

The goal for developing and scientifically testing what I called *Framework 21* was to provide more challenge, rigor, and relevance for middle-grade, high-ability, and gifted students in the fourth and fifth quintile achievement groups and improve their overall achievement level. I decided the final draft of the framework would need to:

- Incorporate challenge, rigor, and the newly drafted state standards
- Extend the regular core curriculum and guide students to make connections to larger ideas
- Be personally meaningful and essential to their lives
- Hold their attention
- Keep them motivated and interested

Additionally, I wanted aspects of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* to be incorporated into the curriculum framework—given that our district served many inner-city, low-socioeconomic, high-ability, and gifted students—and I felt strongly about the effectiveness of the poverty framework. Finally, technology and 21st-century skills would be important to include in the framework.

### Meeting the Challenge

Meeting the challenge of refining the framework and scientifically testing it began with a review of pertinent literature about programs for high-ability and gifted learners, as well as recommenda-
tions from experts surrounding the needs of these students. Through my research, I found that the majority of recommendations for a differentiated, advanced curriculum design included the following components:

- Modification of content, process, product, and affective skills (Van Tassel-Baska, 1988; Slocumb & Payne, 2000)
- Utilization of universal concepts, themes, or big ideas across disciplines (Slocumb & Payne, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)
- Relationships, culture, and resources (Slocumb & Payne, 2000; Tomlinson et al., 2002)
- Learning experiences that connect sequentially and relevantly to students' lives as opposed to randomly selected/piecemeal enrichment experiences (Tomlinson et al., 2002; Payne, 2002; Slocumb & Payne, 2000)
- Higher order thinking strategies, such as Bloom's new and old taxonomy, Gardner's multiple intelligences, and Webb's levels of knowledge (Bloom, 1956; Gardner 2006; Webb, 2008).

Further investigation found that researchers who completed studies incorporating similar components had positive results. Research studies completed by Taraban, Box, Myers, Pollard, and Bowen (2007), Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, and Assouline (2007), Feng, Van Tassel-Baska, Quek, Wenyu, and O’Neill (2005), and Hyde-Kondor (2007) suggested that when a combination of the aforementioned components was part of curricula, students:

- Gained more content knowledge of process skills
- Began college with significantly higher cognitive scores
- Dramatically increased achievement patterns
- Strengthened engagement and motivation
- Improved attendance
- Raised SAT and other achievement scores
- Did better in advanced placement classes

In a recent best-practices article from Education Week, a principal in Oregon—using a combination of relationship skills, themes, standards, and project-based learning—has transformed a poorly performing alternative school into one that increased attendance rates from 23% to 90%, decreased the dropout rate from 20% to 12.5%, increased reading achievement from a collective 9% to 52%, and continues to make impressive gains in other core subject areas (Heitin, 2012).

The Framework

My review of literature led me to a final draft of Framework 21. The finalized framework to be field-tested began with pre- and post-assessments of achievement, perceptions of learning, and resources, as well as
pre-assessments of learning styles, intelligences, and interests/recommendations.

The heart of the framework consisted of four overarching components.

**Part 1** focused on the curriculum and learning environment, which was based on a macro-managed approach. It also was theme-based, interactive, and extended the core curriculum through state standards.

**Part 2** was made up of 21st-century skills and technology, which included real-world/authentic tasks, problem solving, and technology skills.

**Part 3** consisted of social/emotional and relationship skills, which included aspects of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005), such as:

- *Rapport* between teacher, students, and parents
- *Actively engaging students* and interacting with them
- Providing *resources* that would ensure a successful classroom and independent learning experience
- Knowing and understanding the *hidden rules* and *generational attributes* of various groups
- Acknowledging students as individuals

**Part 4** focused on the skills and experience of the teacher. Teachers of advanced students need experience with framed, individualized, and whole-group learning; must possess a passion for learning; need to have a repertoire of skills that understand individual student learning styles; and must be willing to learn, unlearn, and relearn. To quote futurist Alvin Toffler, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” (Toffler, 2007).

Upon completing my development of *Framework 21*, I received permission from the school district and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to scientifically test the curriculum during the 2008–09 school year. I field-tested the framework with a treatment and control population that included 156 fifth- and sixth-grade diverse, intellectually gifted learners from four middle schools and one Montessori school (Johnson, 2010). The treatment curriculum implemented during the study year supported *universal concept POWER*, and the core subjects that were extended through the concept of power were Reading/Language Arts (novel study), Science (physics), and Social Studies (political science). *Framework 21* was the feature in my dissertation titled *A Curriculum Design that Meets the Needs of 21st-Century Gifted Learners*.

**Results**

The study year results from a scientifically based research program began to indicate a pattern. Results showed that the core subject areas of concentration during the study year (Reading/Language Arts, Science, Social Studies) were areas where the treatment group demonstrated the most growth.
The statistical significance (numbers with asterisks) in the study indicated that extending the core curriculum with universal concepts and interesting, meaningful units of study helped the students in the treatment group improve their achievement level. The results of the qualitative part of the study were important as well. Post-questionnaires for motivation and interest showed that students felt that:

a) The design of the projects resulted in major learning experiences
b) The topics/units of study were interesting, enjoyable, challenging, and real-life
c) Group interaction was important
d) Basic skills were reinforced
e) It was important to have a teacher who cared, interacted, and fostered relationships
f) They did not have enough class discussion time and immediate feedback
g) They weren’t apprised of their progress as frequently as they would have liked; however, they really preferred the designed progress report that reflected averages as opposed to the report that reflected satisfactory and non-satisfactory as grades

As I conducted my study with middle-grade students, Dr. Slocumb field-tested universal concepts with elementary students in another school district. Based on

Summary of Significance for the Core Academic Subjects Between the Treatment and Control Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Subject</th>
<th>Significant</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0.00 **</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.00 **</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Effect (between subjects)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0.05 *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the statistical significance from my study and his work with students in the other school district. Dr. Slocumb added information to *Removing the Mask* and revised the title to *Removing the Mask: How to Identify and Develop Giftedness in Students from Poverty* (Slocumb & Payne, 2011). The new edition’s Chapter 9, “Integrated Thematic Units of Instruction,” focuses on educating the practitioner on how to connect learning experiences and disciplines to powerful themes or larger ideas.

After the study year, I continued with the implementation of the framework, and I kept tracking results. The pattern developed in the study year continued with one addition. In 2009–10, *Framework 21* was implemented with the theme *Discovery*. The *Discovery* curriculum consisted of two units of Science (physics and forensic science), one unit of Writing (narrative writing—mystery short stories), and one unit of Math (personal finance/the stock market) during the year. The 2010 spring achievement scores showed students who were truly high ability and gifted made significant gains in Science. Scores ranged from the 85th percentile to the 99th percentile and were significantly better than Science scores from the spring of 2009. Writing scores ranged from average to above average (average score = 4 and above average scores = 5 and 6), with the majority being above average. Math achievement scores remained the same or rose slightly. The one addition that I noticed was students who perceived their regular program learning and classroom experiences positively performed very well. Students who perceived their regular program learning and classroom experiences negatively did not score as well as students who saw their regular program experiences positively.

The 2010–11 implementation of the framework brought about a change and a problem to solve. A newly appointed district supervisor for the gifted program selected the curriculum for the school year. The selected year-long unit was the 1920s, which focused solely on Social Studies. In my mind, presenting the 1920s unit to middle school students was going to be a challenge, as I could not imagine a high level of interest about a period in the United States that happened over 90 years ago without a meaningful connection. To solve this problem and make the unit more meaningful to the students and their lives, I requested through the district office permission to continue to implement *Framework 21* in concert with the 1920s curriculum. I was approved, so I selected *universal concepts Migration, Interdependence, and Culture*, which I felt coincided well with the 1920s unit and the culture and backgrounds of the students I served.

Many topics were discussed during that year-long study. We discussed the *Great Migration*. I connected to students’ lives by offering my opinion of why so many
of them had relatives who lived in the northern parts of the United States. I explained their relatives may be direct descendants of people who migrated from the South because of the oppression of Jim Crow laws. We completed a map activity where students traced the routes of the three major migrating groups. I also introduced students to Isabel Wilkerson’s book on the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010). Many parents went out and bought the book the day I introduced it in class. We discussed bartering systems and the stock market. I connected the crash of the stock market in 1929 and economics of the 1920s in general to the current economical struggles and the current stock market. I discussed how the economy, the stock market, and personal finances were interdependently connected. Students also participated in the national stock market game where they won third place regionally, and one student won second place nationally in *InvestWrite* (2010), the stock market essay contest offered through the SIFMA Foundation.

We discussed the culture of the 1920s and compared it with the current culture. We delved into the Harlem Renaissance, discussed the term renaissance, and had a renaissance learning day in which students worked either individually or in groups, researching a topic of their choice and presenting it to the class. We discussed immigration and the various cultures and groups that now live in the United States as a result of immigration. We discussed current immigration policy and compared it with 1920s policy. Eighth-grade gifted students, hoping to eventually join their future high school’s academic decathlon and debate teams, begged for a debate on immigration. As we were nearing the end of the school year, the debate had to be scheduled the last week of school. Eighth-grade students were researching immigration policy in the United States the last week of school so they could win a debate that had no bearing on their grade. It blew my mind! This request also gave me something else to take home to think about, as I had to hone my knowledge of proper debate procedures. To my surprise, the students brought debate procedures with them to check me for fairness.

Students in sixth and seventh grades did not have a debate but instead traced their family histories. Collectively, these activities made the 1920s come alive as students realized that some aspects from the 1920s and early 1930s are connected to their lives today. The 1920s didn’t seem to the students like a far-removed topic that happened 90 years ago. It became a real-life experience and gave them other things to think about besides homework.

Achievement results upon completion of the 1920s unit were positive for seventh- and eighth-grade students. These students
improved their achievement level in Social Studies. Sixth-grade results in one school, however, were not positive. Even though students viewed their gifted classroom learning experiences positively, they struggled somewhat as they were pulled out for their gifted class at an odd time in the afternoon when their time spent in the gifted classroom was significantly shortened. Moreover, the majority of students viewed their regular program experience quite negatively. Achievement results for sixth grade in that one school yielded the biggest drop in scores.

Those results constituted a third big “aha” moment for me and sent a powerful message that even if gifted curriculum framework and classroom climate were viewed positively, it was equally important for the regular program teachers to have the same classroom climate to gain significant achievement improvements. Whether we knew it or not, the regular program teachers and I were interdependently connected for gains in achievement among high-ability and gifted students. In the words of James Comer (2001), “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” For the 2011–12 school year, I was able to implement the framework with no resistance from the district office; however, I did have to implement the framework in concert with the 1930s mandated theme. The universal concept for the 2011–12 year was Frontiers.

Implications/Recommendations

Based on three years’ results from implementing the framework, I believe that a framework consisting of a combination of a theme-based curriculum, social/emotional relationship skills, 21st-century skills, technology, and teacher interaction and experience can positively affect overall achievement, not only for high-ability and gifted students but proficient and below-basic students as well. Additionally, an alternative instructional delivery and alternative classroom environment can positively affect motivation, interest, and higher order thinking skills for high-ability and advanced students. Regular program teachers also must consider the incorporation of challenge, rigor, and relevance into learning experiences for the gifted, along with high-ability, average, and below-proficient students in their classrooms. The implementation of the new common core standards across the United States will require teachers to engage students in analysis and problem solving, to use investigation/problem-based approaches, to create relevance of history and current events, or to foster student participation in making meaning and reasoning (Sawchuk, 2012). Implementation of the new common core standards will promote learning, unlearning, and relearning for teachers, as well as students.

Teachers implementing this or a similar framework are encouraged to consider the following recommendations for curriculum, lesson planning, and instructional delivery:

- Best-practice curriculum frameworks, in my opinion, work most effectively with social, emotional, and cultural components incorporated.
- Twenty-first-century skills must be incorporated in any designed cur-
riculum model. Those skills would include:

- Basic scientific and technological literacies, visual and information literacy, cultural literacy, and global awareness
- Adaptability or managing complexity and self-direction, curiosity, creativity, risk taking, higher order thinking, and sound reasoning
- Teaming and collaboration, personal and social responsibility, and interactive communication
- Quality, state-of-the-art results; prioritizing; planning and managing for results; effective use of real-world tools; and high-quality results with real-world applications

- Make topics come alive
  - Get past textbooks, teacher manuals, and drills
  - Make topics “jump off the page” with examples and stories that energize the age group

- Get personal
  - Students enjoy knowing teachers as “real people”
  - Share some personal thoughts and experiences that connect to the topic being discussed, but don’t overdo it

- Connect to real life
  - Make time for students to evaluate the lesson by thinking about any personal context it may have
  - Allow students to compare and contrast elements of the topic to their lives and current events
  - Make the topic relevant

- Actively engage students
  - Provide opportunities for students to make sense of the information

- Be alert and aware
  - Notice student expressions, body language, and interest levels
  - Make eye contact, and walk around the room
  - Change strategies if students become uninterested during the lesson
  - Keep students active in a variety of ways for optimal learning

- Acknowledge each student as an individual
  - Provide specific feedback that encourages students to self-monitor their learning
  - Offer immediate feedback with graded papers and personal notes on graded papers to motivate and encourage students (Stein, 2009)

Insights and Reflections

I gleaned valuable insight from the research study to apply to current teaching practices. Those insights included knowledge of current trends, best practices, and the use of quantitative and qualitative data as driving vehicles for curriculum planning and instructional delivery. Moreover, I
learned the importance of frequent reconfiguration of the learning environment; the benefits of small-group discussion and individual discussion; the importance of immediate feedback on motivation, interest, and higher-order thinking ability; and the importance of relationships between/among students, teachers, and parents.

The development of this framework has resulted in the original list of 26 universal concepts, plus 30 other concepts that could be used as annual themes. I have taken 17 of the concepts and developed 3–4 units of study that coincide with each theme and standards. I call them curriculum rotations.

A regular program teacher would be able to incorporate this framework into the regular program curriculum. Would it take time and effort? Yes, extensive time and effort. Once the rotation is developed, however, a teacher could use it year after year. I would not suggest that teachers develop 17 rotations, but a self-contained teacher may want to develop one to three rotations with one or two core subjects, or a team of teachers may each want to develop a concept curriculum and use it annually. I believe it would be an extremely arduous task for one teacher to attempt to complete this framework with all four core subjects. Begin slowly with one core subject. It is also advisable to pre-assess students’ learning styles, intelligences, strengths, interests, and most importantly, resources each year. I make the pre-assessments meaningful by connecting them to the students’ ultimate goals upon completion of educational training (high school or college). Other tips that were helpful to me in organizing this best-practice idea—and in getting colleagues involved—include:

- Organize Professional Learning Communities (PLC) that will involve colleagues. I believe that this framework will improve overall achievement of many students if teams of colleagues work together (Honawar, 2008).

- Read the following books as the framework is implemented:
  - Understanding Learning: the How, the Why, the What—Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.
  - A Framework for Understanding Poverty—Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.
  - Removing the Mask: How to Identify and Develop Giftedness in Students from Poverty (2nd ed.)—Paul D. Slocumb, Ed.D., and Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D. (Chapters 8, 9, and 10 are crucial to understanding the framework)
  - Understanding by Design—Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe
  - The Parallel Curriculum—Carol Ann Tomlinson et al.

- Begin with an easier, single concept, such as Change or Exploration.

- Communicate with colleagues often to share ideas.

- Track achievement and survey students. This tracking serves as a guide for improvements (Henchey, 2012).
• Keep portfolios of students’ artifacts. Portfolios could be crucial to teacher evaluation systems, such as the evaluation rubric in Tennessee (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, www.niet.org, 2012). Portfolios also can provide modeling examples of strong, well-prepared projects and assignments and can help you improve a unit based on review of previous work.

• Celebrate success with students. When I implemented the Power universal concept in 2008–09 (my doctoral study year), one of the units I presented was Political Science. The end of the unit was the week before the election. My high-ability and gifted students organized a schoolwide vote, and we had a huge rally in my classroom with lots of prizes that I ordered from the Oriental Trading Company. We also had food. Students still talk about the rally today. They also understand the importance of voting, the various talking points in politics, the Constitution of the United States, and how our government works—compared with other nations, governments, and leaders.

It is my hope that regular program teachers will use this best practice or an alternative version to incorporate components of differentiated instruction into the regular classroom for high-ability and gifted learners, as well as average learners. I believe making meaningful connections in curricula and using powerful concepts will help students better understand and synthesize their learning—and, of course, give them something else to take home to think about besides homework! Teaching academics and examining data, teaching ethics when appropriate, and inspiring and developing creativity, originality, and innovation intertwine the art and science of teaching to educate the whole child. It is my further hope that Framework 21 and other creative and innovative best practices will help foster a national conversation on appropriate curricula, instructional delivery methods, and passion for the provision of sound interventions for 21st-century student learning.

Addendum: Follow-Up to the 2011–12 School Year

In an earlier section of Framework 21: Educating the Whole Child, it was stated that the selected gifted curriculum focused on a year-long study of the 1930s, and the theme was Frontiers. The “Frontiers” theme was selected because of the myriad new initiatives in the 1930s through the New Deal that still affect life today, such as minimum wage, FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation), and the Social Security Act. My classes also were going to work on a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) project that would require creativity, thus a new frontier.

Gifted units taught under the Frontier theme and in conjunction with the 1930s curriculum included:

• Personal finance, which included activities on minimum wage, car loans, bank activities, mortgage activities, 401(k)’s, and calculating net worth.

• One group of students participated in the stock market and the InvestWrite
essay contest. The essay of one of the students won first place in the state with the InvestWrite competition.

- **Novel studies**, sixth grade—Bud, Not Buddy and seventh/eighth grades—To Kill a Mockingbird. Both books are set in the 1930s, and the stories address the challenges of the 1930s, both fiscal and social.

- **STEM project**: I received a grant from the Tennessee Association of the Gifted (TAG, 2012) for the STEM project. The project concentrated on a Rube Goldberg-esque project in which students designed a complex machine from simple machines that would perform a task.

Gifted students participating in my classes performed well academically based on results in the core areas of concentration (Reading/Language Arts and Social Studies). The Science unit was taught at the end of the school year and focused only on simple machines. I offer some general notes about my gifted classes and the students. Percentile averages follow.

- Intellectually gifted in the state of Tennessee begins slightly above one standard deviation above the mean of intelligence tests at 118.

- Students' gifted ability range attending my classes extends from high average (110–119) to very superior (above 130) with the majority of students in the lower limits of the superior range (120–129).

- The majority of regular program teachers teach to the average/proficient level.

- Of the two schools I serve, students in one school attend classes one time per week during their grade’s activity period, and students in the other school attend classes twice per week during their grade’s intervention time.

- It is also important to note that the majority of my students lack resources, and their families have been greatly impacted by the economic recession.

- Students in what I will refer to as School #2 faced many challenges this past school year with teacher changes, many substitutes, and administrative changes. Many of the students in this school were new to me in 2011–12.

- Students in School #1 were more structured. The administrative staff had been in place for two years, along with the majority of teachers, including me. Gifted students in that school have been displeased for the past two years that their gifted class time is during their grade’s activity period. They must miss activity one day per week.

- Students in both schools looked upon parts of their regular program experiences negatively, as well as some parts positively. The 1930s curriculum was not a favorite topic for most of the students in my classes.

- Students enjoyed the personal finance study and the novel studies.

- Students were excited about all of the real-life decisions they made for their “identity” with the personal finance unit. The favorite was the purchase of a house and calculating a mortgage.
• The highlight of the novel study for sixth grade (Bud, Not Buddy) was a party that focused on fried bologna sandwiches and Big Red sodas and a viewing of the Shirley Temple film Curly Top.

• The highlight of the novel study for seventh and eighth grades (To Kill a Mockingbird) was a trip to a very old, small, bijou theater to view the black-and-white version of To Kill a Mockingbird and to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the film. They also thought it was cool that President Obama hosted a viewing of the film at the White House and invited the actor who portrayed Scout Finch (Mary Badham). Students were served popcorn and a drink at the theater and went to McDonald’s for lunch afterward. A group of students made a thank-you poster. That touched my soul.

Based on these general notes, I offer the following achievement results for the 2011–12 school year:

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Total Reading for Sixth-Grade Gifted Students

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Total Social Studies for Sixth-Grade Gifted Students

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Special Notes

CHANGE IS DIFFICULT

* Project Explore is one of the success programs from the aha! Process company that my school district embraced. The program is thriving and successful today. Through Slocumb and Payne’s gifted identification process, the ratio of majority to minority students in the gifted program shifted from approximately 80% (Caucasian) to 20% (African American, Hispanic, and Asian) to approximately 60% (Caucasian) to 40% (African American, Hispanic, and Asian), which was the recommended ratio the system strived to achieve for Unitary Status. Through a yearly screening process, approximately 10% of Project Explore students make the transition to gifted classes. The district has shown real movement in the direction of diversity in the gifted program and has strived to maintain the Project Explore program, even after Unitary Status was attained in 2010.

* With a mandate from the district office, there has been movement with regard to changes in the 20-year-old gifted curriculum in the direction of a standards-based, differentiated, alternative, hands-on approach. Staff members are gradually incorporating universal themes to make connections. A theme-based curriculum, however, has not yet been fully embraced. There has been no professional development training for regular program teachers on theme-based curricula since Dr. Slocumb presented a short synopsis of the universal concept idea in 2002. So, the battle for a paradigm shift in the gifted curriculum in my school district continues.

* As our district is approximately 70% minority or other ethnicity, with approximately 60% from low-socioeconomic environments, I believe A Framework for Understanding Poverty will be increasingly crucial to our system, particularly middle and high schools to see improvements in achievement, discipline, apathy reduction, and improved graduation rates. Additionally, the implementation of common core standards within the next year will most likely result in professional development that is theme-focused; concentrates more on higher order thinking skills and activities; incorporates challenge, rigor, and relevance; and, most importantly, enhances social/emotional relationship skills.

This article is an excerpt from “A Curriculum Design that Meets the Needs of the 21st-Century Gifted Learner,” an unpublished dissertation by Teresa A. Johnson, Ed.D.
References


**Teresa A. Johnson, Ed.D.,** of Jackson, Tennessee, has been a professional educator since 1984. She has served as an elementary and intermediate regular and special education teacher (4–6). She currently serves as special education teacher for the middle level (6–8). She has been a district trainer for aha! Process for 12 years. Dr. Johnson earned a B.S. from Lane College, in Jackson; a master’s in Education from Tennessee State University, in Nashville; and a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Professional Practice from Trevecca Nazarene University, Nashville. She holds endorsements in elementary education and gifted education, and she is a licensed administrator.
**Introduction**

Dubuque, Iowa, has been implementing Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) concepts on a communitywide basis since 2007. Beginning with Bridges and going on to Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (DeVol, 2006) in 2008, Dubuque added the Circles® Campaign in 2010. At every step the process has been both exciting and challenging. Dubuque has experienced real successes and real hurdles; stories of amazing transformation and examples of unforeseen barriers; wide open roads of opportunity and dead ends brought about by limited and even false vision.

On the journey Dubuque has gained valuable insight into bringing Bridges®, Getting Ahead™, and Circles together to address poverty in a community. This article will look at the Dubuque experience with the hope that the information will be useful to other communities that want to do great work changing lives—and the community as a whole—through Bridges, Getting Ahead, and Circles. The focus of the article will be on the Dubuque experience with the Getting Ahead program and how Dubuque has been able to build a Bridges/Circles community with Getting Ahead as a foundation.
Champions

Getting started with any initiative requires community “champions.” Our (the authors’) own history includes how we became the community champions for Getting Ahead, Bridges, and Circles. It may break the hidden rule of modesty for us to declare ourselves “champions,” but we would be remiss if we did not mention the importance of having those individuals who are very committed to advancing the concepts and principles of Bridges, as well as the concrete programming of Getting Ahead and Circles. More than that, we were honored to have the privilege of being put in the position of community champions for Dubuque.

Jim was our first champion. Having been exposed to Ruby Payne’s *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Payne, 2005) through his job as a school psychologist, he became something of a Bridges evangelist in Dubuque, speaking to any group or individual who would listen. Beyond champions, it is good have connections. Carroll was working within the housing department and became the second champion (at the urging of her supervisor, Housing Department Director David Harris, who deserves a large part of the credit for getting everything started in Dubuque). Carroll became the champion within the institutional system from which Getting Ahead was launched. Ermina participated as an investigator in our third round of Getting Ahead and remained involved as a participant champion and then as a city employee in the role of Circles coach. Champions are important, and we mention ourselves as champions not to boast, but because none of us consider ourselves to be anything special—anyone can become a champion for community sustainability. However, we have come to recognize that people in the champion role are essential, especially at the beginning. You may be reading this and thinking that you are not anyone special. We want to encourage you that if you passionately believe this work can make a difference in your community, you can be one of the champions who makes it happen!

Preparing the Ground

Dubuque is a community of about 60,000 people that is approximately 95% White. It has a poverty rate of about 9% according to the 2010 census. A major challenge that Dubuque has faced over the past 10 years has been the migration of people from larger cities, principally Chicago and Milwaukee, to the Dubuque area. Many people moving to Dubuque have been doing so to get away from the challenges of living in poverty in those large metropolitan areas. The population has been disproportionately (as compared with Dubuque) non-White and from a poverty background. Dubuque is responding to these new “immigrants” in many favorable ways, but many challenges remain.

We found it very useful to communicate to as many people as possible a basic understanding of the Bridges concepts before starting our Getting Ahead groups. This took place over the course of almost two years during which we spoke to many groups, including social service agencies, local service groups, churches, and gov-
ernment agencies and services such as the local library. During these presentations we did not ask for specific action on the part of any group, but we did prepare the ground for Getting Ahead. When we began our first Getting Ahead group in January 2008, we were able to fund it entirely with donations received in response to an appeal for contributions directed primarily at those who had attended one of our presentations.

Since the January 2008 Getting Ahead group, we have completed seven rounds of Getting Ahead groups and have had 174 people graduate. We have been able to maintain a level of racial diversity in our groups, with about 30% of Getting Ahead investigators being people of color. Details of current Getting Ahead groups are included in the next section, as are statistics regarding graduates. What’s important is that we have been able to use the Getting Ahead groups as a foundation for establishing a functioning Bridges/Circles community. Our weekly meetings often include more than 100 people, and we now have a significant voice in the community on the subject of poverty.

Finding a Home

We were fortunate to get connected with the city government early in our beginning stages. Whether you make a partner in the public or private sector, it is good to have a sponsoring organization—and the earlier the better. Jim, as an individual championing Bridges Out of Poverty concepts in the community on his own, had great information, but he had no context other than his own enthusiasm in which to place an application of those concepts. When we partnered with the City of Dubuque Housing Department, we became “housed” within an organization (bad pun intended), and we gained a level of community credibility that was very important to the predominantly middle-class audiences to which we were presenting. The community began to see us as an initiative of the housing department and, therefore, as an initiative of the city government. For good or for bad, at least people knew where to find us! We don’t believe that the sponsoring agency needs to be government affiliated, but we do believe that without a sponsoring organization that has some established footprint in the community, it will be difficult to generate momentum for the good work that you want to do.

Lessons Learned

• The culmination of our preparation time was a community training event that we held in May 2007. We promoted the event almost exclusively through email, beginning with the housing department and their contacts. We had more than 200 people in attendance, far surpassing our expectations and affirming for us that there is a real hunger for good information addressing poverty.

• Receiving funding from private donations was a good start but may have been a false positive. We have learned that middle-class people and institutions love to give money when they first hear about exciting causes and projects. But sustained giving is more
challenging to arrange. Not anticipating this left us scrambling for funding for successive rounds of Getting Ahead until we were able to arrange more predictable financial support, in our case through grants and city government support. Our failure was that we did not have a good strategy for following up with donors and providing them with compelling reasons to continue to support Getting Ahead groups. People will give to good work, but only if they know what it is and how it is being effective.

- Sponsoring organizations are great and maybe even necessary, but they also come with their own sets of hidden rules, and in the case of the government, maybe not-so-hidden rules. Being affiliated with the city government has been of great benefit to us in terms of credibility, access to resources, and even funding, but it has not been without barriers and frustrations—the government can be a labyrinth of bureaucracy! But any middle-class organization, public or private, is going to have expectations, paperwork, protocols, and procedures. Don’t be surprised by those, and be prepared to learn some new hidden rules if it is an organization with which you have not worked closely in the past.

Getting Ahead from the Ground Up

In this section we want to talk about the nuts and bolts of implementing Getting Ahead groups. We have absolutely delighted in these groups and have seen individuals benefit greatly from them. We also see affiliated community members becoming excited about the results and stories and wanting to be more involved in ongoing support through Circles. There are all kinds of logistics involved with doing Getting Ahead well. Some of them were obvious to us when we started, while others were unexpected and presented unforeseen challenges. What follows is a summary of what we have experienced and learned through eight rounds of Getting Ahead groups.

**Space**

It is good to find space that is free! We are currently meeting in a public school in the downtown area of our community. We have also had meetings in government buildings, churches, and social service organizations. Here are some things to think of:

- Space should be easily accessible to the people you are working with. We have tried locations that met other criteria but were difficult to access for transportation reasons, and they didn’t work as well. Accessibility for the disabled is also a consideration.
- If you are going to use another organization’s space, be aware of their hidden rules and their mental models of poverty. We encountered this challenge in one situation when we worked with a downtown church to host one of our Getting Ahead groups. After each of the first few weeks, we received a phone call informing us of things that were not left as they wanted them (chairs in the wrong place, a curtain not closed, etc.). While we had
been doing our best to leave things as we found them, apparently we were not measuring up. We decided to discontinue our group meetings there after our fourth session, during which one of our leaders spent the entire time cleaning up the kitchen. We discovered on our arrival that the freezer door had been left open and raspberry sherbet had melted and spilled inside the freezer and onto the floor. The next day we received a call informing us that we needed to keep a closer watch on “our people” as there were two hams missing from the freezer. While the church was generous in its offer of a meeting space and communicated civilly with us, it was clear that their assumptions about who we were and the importance of their physical property as a hidden rule of that system were going to interfere with our use of the space. Better understanding of this possibility and communication about it with the hosting church before we started our groups might have saved both of us some stress.

• When you are seeking space to hold meetings, it is good if there is a place to store materials on-site. Moving all the materials in and out of places is cumbersome and time-consuming.

• Be aware of childcare and meals when you are thinking of space. Having a good space for the Getting Ahead meetings is important, but is there space for the kids? (Hint: A space with an outdoor play area is a good thing.) Are there adequate facilities for preparing, serving, and cleaning up a meal for the investigators and their children?

Meals

Meals are an important part of the whole process. Sharing meals together builds community not only within the Getting Ahead group but also with community members who provide meals. Churches and other service-oriented groups are likely candidates for donating meals—and, we hope, sticking around to meet with the people who are eating them. Here are some things we have learned about meals:

• Budget for meals even if you don’t need to use the money that often. Having resources in reserve in case something comes up and the planned meal can’t be provided is good. Also, occasionally there is not enough food, and it’s good to be able to make a quick run if needed.

• Along with providing food if needed, the budget allows you to have an ample supply of plates, napkins, plasticware, cups, etc. on hand. Some groups that provide meals will think to bring them, some won’t. It’s great to have your own supplies when needed.

• Middle-class organizations often attempt to approach serving a meal at Getting Ahead in the same way they might approach serving at the homeless shelter: People go through the line, and the servers dish out the food. Organizations providing a meal at a Getting Ahead group may set up in that format. It fits the donating organization’s mental model of what it means to serve a meal, and it is a safe way to interact with people without actually having to interact. (“Would you like some beans?”) We do not allow
our volunteer groups to serve in this fashion. Instead we have them set up a self-serve buffet. Then we encourage volunteers to go through the line with the people and sit and eat with them. Though not everyone chooses to do so, many do, and this opening of communication across economic class lines is an integral part of the larger work of building community sustainability through increased understanding.

• Providing a meal is a great first contact for organizations that might be interested in providing further assistance. Promote it as such.

Childcare

Childcare is an absolute necessity, but it can be incredibly challenging to provide and do well. Space is important, as is having access to materials that can keep the kids engaged. Then, of course, you have to find the people to do it! We have used AmeriCorps volunteers and have worked with local colleges, sometimes finding childcare workers through their work study programs. Here are some thoughts:

• Set limits. For example, childcare is provided only for children whose parents are present. Childcare is provided for children through age 12. Older children can attend but are expected to help with childcare.

• Two hours of free time is a really bad thing! Have structured activities for the kids.

• Divide and conquer. Using a centers model, break the kids into groups and move them through two or three different activities in an evening. We find it easiest to break the kids up by age, but other ways may work just as well. We include things like crafts, reading, homework help, and some large motor time in the gym, if available, or outdoors.

• Have a system for getting the parents when situations arise. For example, we do not change diapers.

• Child safety is a big issue these days. We recommend a check-in and check-out system in which the parent is able to take a child through a defined process (as opposed to the child simply running out of the room when he sees his mom). Also consider how you will deal with the issue of criminal background checks for childcare volunteers.

Group Composition

How to recruit and choose the right folks for the group is an important part of the process, and a lot of it will depend on the knowledge you already have regarding the people in your area who you think might be the best candidates. Here are a few lessons we have learned:

• It pays to interview well. Knowing how people express themselves and their motivations can be helpful in discerning how well they are likely to do in a group like Getting Ahead. We got into a bit of a trap at one point in which our funding required us to take a certain number of participants from a specified population. In order to fill
that requirement, we were a bit lax in who we accepted from that population. It compromised the group’s effectiveness, both for the participants who were not ready for the experience, as well as for those who were ready but had fellow group members who were not as committed or prepared as they were. It is better to have fewer, stronger members than it is to have more members but less cohesion and common direction.

• Be especially aware of mental health issues that are likely to affect a group. This is a difficult issue because there is definitely a correlation between mental health and poverty, and there is definitely a need for services for people in the area of mental health. However, we have had groups dominated by individuals who were working out issues other than what the Getting Ahead curriculum is designed to address.

• Diversity in the group is valuable and should be intentional when possible. We look at race, gender, age, and family makeup, especially in our groups. The diverse backgrounds provide for a deeper, richer investigation into poverty. It also provides an excellent opportunity to develop social capital with others who are different, which can result in more confidence in doing the same outside the group.

• Have a plan for contacting participants who miss a session unexpectedly. The simplest solution is to have one of the facilitators be responsible for making a phone call or sending a text to anyone who is not present.

Logistics

Running the Getting Ahead groups often presents more logistical challenges than people might think. The following is a list of miscellaneous issues related to running Getting Ahead groups:

• Payment: When we started, we were giving people cash at the end of each meeting. While our participants liked it, our bookkeepers did not! We now are using direct deposit, which makes our bookkeepers very happy but has also had the unintended benefit of providing an opportunity for experience, discussion, and investigation of the banking system. This has been a good example of how the system requires certain things of individuals—in this case receiving payment by direct deposit—but it’s not personal; in other words, it does not mean that someone doesn’t trust you.

• It’s good to have an ample supply of extra paper, pencils, pens, and such. Self-adhesive easel paper is also great for making and retaining mental models for future use. If these are preserved and put up each week, they can become a sort of visual timeline of all that the group has covered.

• We mentioned that having storage space on-site is great as it saves having to move everything every week. This won’t always be available, so large plastic storage bins can make moving easier. We used cardboard boxes when we first started, and they were not quite as effective in the long term as they broke down fairly quickly.
• We have done door prizes for participants as a bit of added incentive, as well as just plain for the fun of it. Right now the door prize is a bit of additional money direct deposited. We have also used gift cards.

• Think about possible future facilitators early in the process, and be discerning about this. Many people enjoy the Getting Ahead experience and see becoming a facilitator as a way to continue to do so. However, small group facilitation is not easy to do well, regardless of the level of commitment and/or enthusiasm of the facilitator. Choose facilitators who communicate well and who are able to express both middle-class and poverty concepts well.

• As the groups have progressed, we have encountered some special situations that warranted developing a set of “extra rules.” By addressing these issues at the beginning of the process, we have been able to avoid many possible difficulties, and we have a context for discussing them if they arise. A copy of the rules we use is attached as an appendix.

• Graduation: We have found that a big graduation is worth the time, effort, and expense. We have had a number of people for whom this was the first thing that they felt like they had completed, if not ever, then at least in a very long time. We have a nice dinner at a banquet hall that is for graduates and staff only. We do not provide childcare for this event; however, children and other family are welcome at the graduation ceremony following the meal. Then we have some live music, donated if possible, followed by a public ceremony including at least one speaker from the group, as well as a community leader who addresses the graduates—and at the same time gets to see a bit of the effect the process can have on individual lives!

The Good News—Getting Ahead Results

In Dubuque we are in the process of completing our eighth round of Getting Ahead groups. We started with one group, we have done as many as three at a time, and now, in our eighth round, we have returned to doing just one (this is in large part due to the reality of the bad news described in the next section). We have graduated 174 investigators in seven rounds of Getting Ahead, with an overall completion rate of about 70%. Of those who did not complete the program, about one third (10% of the total) were due to circumstances such as gaining employment or educational opportunities, leaving a true dropout rate of about 20%. We are in the process of developing better data collection and analysis, but through our first three rounds completed 2008–09, we had the following results among graduates of the program:

Our results are particularly encouraging in the area of employment in that these data were collected from 2008 through 2010—not exactly a great time to be measuring employment statistics! Among our current challenges is connecting with local businesses in effective partnerships so that the Getting Ahead process leads more directly to employment opportunities. We
were also a bit surprised at the homelessness statistics; this was not an original focus of our work. We sort of stumbled into it when we were collecting demographic data about the investigators. In following up, we discovered the results reported in the graph above.

But with our good news, we also began to recognize a difficulty in the process we had started …

The Challenge of Ongoing Support

One of the problems that we encountered with our Getting Ahead classes was that we did not adequately anticipate the need for ongoing support for graduates.† Some of the graduates took the benefits of the experience and moved on to other things in their lives. We hope that they benefited from the Getting Ahead experience and are continuing to apply the principles learned. Maintaining contact with graduates allows us to point to specific situations where individuals have established and maintained stability that was not as evident before their participation in Getting Ahead. The results related to homelessness from our first three rounds are an example. However, some of the graduates took the information and either simply disappeared from our radar or returned to life as it had been, seemingly without any

† Editors’ note: The new edition of Facilitator Notes for Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (2013) provides information on a number of ways that additional support can be developed with Getting Ahead graduates.
significant changes—at least, any that we could document. There was also a group that continued to be involved in Getting Ahead by their own choice. They became facilitators or assisted with other organizational needs.

Our concern was with the people who ended their Getting Ahead experience with plans and motivation but who needed a more intentional support system in which to carry out those plans and apply that motivation. This is what led us to establish Circles in Dubuque. We had a desire to create a community of support for those Getting Ahead participants who wanted it, as well as a community of learning and understanding for those community members who desired to be a part of real change in real lives. The Circles Campaign seemed perfectly designed to meet our needs. For the past two years we have been an official Circles Campaign site and are holding weekly meetings, developing allies, and forming matched circles as a part of our ongoing support for our graduates. Please visit www.movethemountain.org for more information about the Circles Campaign. It’s all very exciting, and we have seen positive results from this follow-up system already, but it has exposed another issue.

Perhaps because we are a part of a middle-class system, we got caught in a “more is better” mindset. We wanted to “achieve” more Getting Ahead graduates. We viewed numerical statistics as the best way to measure our effectiveness. We had graphs to prove we were making a difference—we even included them in this chapter! It made sense in the context of our middle-class system’s statistical sensitivities. However, once we started a follow-up support program, in our case the Circles Campaign, we realized that real support required a number of staff members and volunteers that was steadily increasing with the number of graduates we were getting through the Getting Ahead groups. This has been a difficult realization for us because we truly love Getting Ahead and believe it to be an effective process of self-examination that can lead to real and lasting change. But for many, and probably most, Getting Ahead is only the beginning of a process that will benefit from, and maybe even require, ongoing support from allies who are willing to walk with a person or family trying to establish a self-supporting, sustainable life when they have come from (and may still be living in the midst of) generational poverty. Finding enough community members who are willing to join in this process and partner with the graduates who are seeking that kind of support has been our greatest challenge to date.

As an example, we currently have a number of graduates who are single mothers under age 35, many of whom are African American. The greatest portion of our allies are retired, white couples in their 60s and 70s. Difficult to find common ground there! That is the reason that we have scaled back the total number of participants included in our Getting Ahead groups. Further, we are weaving the follow-up program into conversations throughout Getting Ahead and are developing and implementing a six-session transition curriculum that is designed to bridge the gap between Getting Ahead and Circles. Both graduates and potential allies will be participating in this transition
program. Our ultimate goal is to develop a system in which every Getting Ahead graduate who wants to can participate fully in Circles and can expect to have allies to support and walk with them.

There may be other support systems that could work as a follow-up for Getting Ahead. We recommend that if you are going to start Getting Ahead, consider using one of Stephen Covey’s seven habits and “begin with the end in mind.” It is unreasonable to expect anyone to go through a 16-week process and then be able to change 20, 30, or even more years of experiences, habits, and survival skills without ongoing support. Decide how you will provide ongoing support before starting Getting Ahead, and then work it into the process. We believe that the Getting Ahead groups we have done have made real and lasting differences in participants’ lives. But we also wonder about those with whom we have lost contact and for whom we did not have a systemic process for keeping them connected with the community.

On the bright side, encountering this dilemma has resulted in a renewed enthusiasm for community presentations and for establishing a functioning Bridges/Circles community. We believe that our Bridges/Circles weekly meetings are providing community members with an opportunity for regular engagement in addressing, as a community, the issue of poverty in Dubuque. Our weekly meetings also afford individuals from a variety of backgrounds and experiences a venue to form relationships with people they might not otherwise know existed. In some cases those relationships become strong enough that they develop into real and lasting social capital through matched circles and other ongoing friendships and partnerships.

Conclusion and Encouragement

As mentioned at the start, we have experienced both success and struggles as we have addressed the issue of poverty in the community of Dubuque through the Bridges, Getting Ahead, and Circles processes. We believe that doing Getting Ahead well is a great place to establish a foundation for ongoing change at the individual, institutional, and community levels. We consider it a privilege to share our experiences and lessons learned in this format, recognizing that we certainly have not been perfect at any stage of the game. We are engaged in a learning process, as are all who are involved in this important work. For those who are not sure they have what it takes to get things going, we hope the information that we have shared will encourage you to step out and take a chance. Your community might just be waiting for a champion like you!

For more information about the City of Dubuque Bridges Initiative, please visit www.cityofdubuque.org/bridges. There you will also find contact information for the authors, any of whom would be delighted to continue the conversation and learn from your experiences.
Appendix—Some Getting Ahead Rules

After doing Getting Ahead groups, we have found it useful to address some situations before they occur so that expectations are clear. Please keep this with your other materials for future reference if needed.

Childcare:

- Childcare is provided for children in your immediate household (those living in the same house/apartment).
- Childcare is provided for children from birth to 12 years of age. Older children are also welcome but will be expected to assist in caring for the younger children.
- Children are not allowed to be in the meeting area during meeting times (exception for nursing babies).
- If for some reason your childcare needs change, especially if it involves additional children, you must call in advance to ensure that there will be sufficient supervision to accommodate the additional children. Advance calls are required even if it is only a one-time situation. Participants who show up with additional children may not be allowed to stay for the meeting.
- Please let the facilitators know if your child has any special health needs or allergies.

Attendance:

- Attendance is required for payment. If you do not arrive by 5:45 p.m., you will not be paid for that evening. If you have a special situation that will require that you be late on a certain evening, please make arrangements in advance with one of the facilitators.
- Getting Ahead is a program that depends on building relationships and knowledge over time. Absences significantly interfere with the benefit to the individual, as well as to what the individual can bring to the group. Participants may miss three sessions before they may be asked to no longer be a part of the group. Makeup sessions can be arranged at the convenience of the participant and one of the facilitators. However, participants will not be paid for makeup sessions. If you know that you are not going to be able to attend a session, please call one of the facilitators.
- We recognize that employment and educational opportunities and schedules can change unexpectedly. If you experience a change that will not allow you to continue to attend Getting Ahead, we will certainly understand that and will encourage you to consider participating in a future group. Switching to the other group being held concurrently will not be considered.
- In the event of severe weather, a decision as to whether to hold the evening’s group will be made by 2 p.m. Group members will be called directly.

Relationship Issues (including transportation):

- Getting Ahead is a social connection group but is not intended to promote or encourage romantic/dating relationships of any kind. Please save this
type of relationship building until after the group has finished the full 20 weeks.

- Group members are encouraged to be supportive and helpful to each other. However, we ask that no money change hands between members for the duration of the group.

**Substance Abuse:**

- Participants who show up for group under the influence of any drugs, including alcohol, will be asked to leave that group. If this happens a second time, the individual will be dismissed from the group.

**References**


**Jim Ott** is a school psychologist with Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency serving schools in Jackson County. He has lived in Dubuque for the past 28 years, and he and his wife, Teresa, have four children who are “native” Dubuquers! Ott was certified in Ruby Payne’s A Framework for Understanding Poverty in 2006 and a year later in Bridges Out of Poverty. Ott is a national consultant with aha! Process for Bridges Out of Poverty and continues to volunteer with the Dubuque Circles Initiative as a speaker/trainer and a facilitator for Getting Ahead groups.

**Carroll Clark** was the family self-sufficiency coordinator for the Dubuque Housing and Community Development Department for 15 years. Clark has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Wisconsin–Platteville. She was instrumental in the beginnings of the Circles Campaign and continues to serve as a volunteer. She recently moved to a part-time position with the City of Dubuque Transportation Department to spend more time with her children. She lives in Dubuque with her husband, Dick, and their three teenage daughters.

**Ermina Soler** is the Circles coach for the city of Dubuque. Soler began studying Bridges Out of Poverty concepts during her AmeriCorps term in Dubuque in 2009. She facilitated her first Getting Ahead class in 2010 and was also trained as a Circles coach. Soler is a dynamic presenter who brings real-life experience, and a little Brooklyn attitude, to the team. She lives in Dubuque with her three children, two teens and a 4-year-old.
Introduction

“In life, the smallest changes can make the biggest impact,” states Kimber, when talking about the success of the Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin’-By World (Getting Ahead™) program. Kimber ought to know; she has experienced the program in virtually all its aspects.

Kimber graduated from the very first Getting Ahead (DeVol, 2006) class that Rural Solutions sponsored in 2010. She then became a facilitator, and by the end of the grant, she served as the project coordinator for the Getting Ahead program in Northeast Colorado. She has seen Getting Ahead investigators (the term used for participants attending the Getting Ahead program) trade a pickup for a car, pay their bills on time to avoid overcharges, track their expenses each week, and advocate effectively for their children at school. She has experienced the power of the Getting Ahead program firsthand.

Kimber is quick to downplay the importance of her role as facilitator for the program. Instead she states:

The Getting Ahead program gives individuals an opportunity to investigate their lives, the resources available to them in their communities, and the resources within themselves. Investigators can have the opportunity to explore what drives decision making and how their behavior impacts their own decisions and what it looks like to make decisions based on future outcomes rather than the tyranny of the moment. It is very
powerful to observe investigators getting to a place where they feel they have more control over their own lives and empowered to make decisions because they believe that they have options for their future.

**Rural Solutions and Northeast Colorado**

Rural Solutions has been the sponsoring organization for the Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) and Getting Ahead programs in Northeast Colorado since 2008. Northeast Colorado is a vast rural region made up of 10 counties covering 17,505 square miles. Seven of these counties are designated by the federal government as frontier counties, which have fewer than seven persons per square mile. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, this region is home to 114,205 people who live and work in many small communities across the region. Approximately 15% of the residents are Hispanic/Latino, and 2% are African American.

In 2009, the per-capita income for this 10-county region was $22,685 (high of $34,189 in Elbert County and low of $19,936 in Morgan County), compared with the Colorado average of $27,041. Region wide, more than 40% of the children qualify for free or reduced lunches in public schools each year, while 19% of the children under age 18 live below the federal poverty line.

There are other risk factors for families to consider in many of our frontier counties. Healthcare and human services are often a long distance from home or simply not available in our small and sometimes rather isolated communities. Not every county in the region has a full-time doctor or dentist; one county has no hospital. Some communities have very limited behavioral health services. Workforce Centers are able to provide only minimal staff, programs, or services in several counties. Public transportation services are extremely limited in the entire region. Compared with much of the rest of Colorado, job opportunities tend to be more limited, and salaries are generally lower than in other regions.

As is often the case when communities lack resources and face challenges that threaten children and families, leaders come together to look for solutions. In 1994 many regional agencies and organizations came together to create Rural Solutions, then named the Northeast Colorado Health and Human Services Consortium. Their purpose and vision was to establish a loosely knit organization that would allow collaboration to seek funding to build and strengthen programs that provide services to children and families.

Rural Solutions has nearly a 20-year history of collaboration and regional coordination to provide services to families in local communities. The mission of Rural Solutions is to “collaborate to address issues and create positive solutions for the health and well being of our diverse communities in Northeast Colorado.” The organization is a coalition of community service providers, community grassroots organizations, mental health providers, social services departments, domestic violence agencies,
handicapped services, public health, area agency on aging, and elected officials. Today, Rural Solutions is really “an organization of organizations” where agencies and organizations throughout the region come to the table to develop programs, provide services, and solve problems in the communities. It continues to serve the 10 rural Northeast Colorado counties of Cheyenne, Elbert, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, Washington, and Yuma.

Development of the Getting Ahead Program in Northeast Colorado

The Bridges Out of Poverty program in this region was developed through the shared vision of several Rural Solutions board members. In early 2008, county social services directors received initial Bridges® training at a state conference. They believed immediately in the vision of the program and were able to see the practical worth for their clients in their individual counties. The board charged Rural Solutions with bringing this program and information to rural Northeast Colorado. As executive director of Rural Solutions, I became a certified Bridges out of Poverty trainer in 2008.

The past few years I have provided the Bridges training for more than 200 professionals who work in the organizations that make up Rural Solutions: caseworkers in the county social services departments, workforce centers staff, nonprofits workers, area agency on aging staff, and mental health workers. Having staff from various human services organizations in the region understand the Bridges concepts has aided in the development of standardized vocabulary to identify the issues around poverty in our individual communities. It also has helped to change practices within these agencies and organizations. This training has shaped institutional discussions of how to define and then create services and programs that build resources for the most at-risk families. This knowledge has led to greater understanding of the day-to-day realities and challenges of people who don’t have enough resources.

In September 2009, Rural Solutions received a substantial grant from the Colorado Department of Human Services Colorado Works Statewide Strategic Use Fund (SSUF) to develop the Getting Ahead program and provide it to at least 90 TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families)-eligible residents in the 10 counties of Northeast Colorado. The grant was substantial enough to provide supportive services to develop Getting Ahead programs in at least seven sites in the region. To ensure that each program would meet the needs of the individual communities, the grant was designed that Rural Solutions work collaboratively with various agencies and organizations.

In addition, Rural Solutions also received ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) funds through Northeast Council of Local Governments, which serves six of the 10 northeast counties. These funds further allowed Rural Solutions to also serve residents whose income was below 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines but may not be TANF-eligible, such as young adults, older adults, or adults who don’t
have children living in the home. These funds targeted adults who were underemployed or those who lost jobs during the downturn of the economy in the region.

**Collaborative Efforts**

From the beginning, the Getting Ahead program was a collaborative effort of several organizations in Northeast Colorado. Rural Solutions served as the lead organization and fiscal agent and provided the program in Elbert, Lincoln, Logan, Sedgwick, and Phillips counties. In addition, the following local family resource centers were instrumental in providing the Getting Ahead program in their various communities—with astounding success:

- The Rural Communities Resource Center (RCRC) developed and provided the Getting Ahead program in communities in Yuma County.
- Washington County Connections provided the program in Washington County.
- The Morgan County Family Center (MCFC) served the residents in Morgan County. MCFC continues to provide the Getting Ahead program, using county United Way funds.
- Prairie Family Center (PFC) served Kit Carson and Cheyenne counties. The Getting Ahead program was especially supported by local churches in the various communities.

Because most of the programs developed locally, many other partners, agencies, business partners, and interested community members “came aboard” to support the Getting Ahead program. In fact, several Getting Ahead classes were offered within domestic violence programs and preschool programs, serving those unique populations. Getting Ahead has become a very successful addition to the overall development of those programs. Many agencies and organizations also became collaborators in Getting Ahead, providing information, instruction, support, and services as needed. The model was strengthened in each county of the region because the collaborative partners knew the needs of their community members and the resources available to them. Learning how to access such skills and determining the specific needs of each Getting Ahead investigator became part of the program curriculum.

**Importance of Competent Facilitators**

When the grant began, several facilitators were assigned to the grant project by the collaborating agencies. Philip DeVol, author of the *Getting Ahead in a Just Gettin’-By World* curriculum, came to Northeast Colorado and trained the initial group. This laid the groundwork for the success of the Getting Ahead program.

Facilitators met regularly to discuss their experiences, sharing ideas and creative activities they had used in their programs. They also shared articles and resources and “new ways of exploring” a concept they had used during a class. Further, these meetings helped to standardize practices and recordkeeping, which was very helpful during the evaluative study that was conducted by Daniel Brisson in
2011. In almost all cases, each person who worked with the Getting Ahead program has been successful as a facilitator beyond the program’s expectations.

It’s interesting to note that the facilitators were as diverse as the investigators themselves. Their educational backgrounds ranged from high school diplomas to advanced college degrees. There is a wide range of age and life experiences. Several were experienced trainers, but for some, becoming a Getting Ahead facilitator was their first experience working with people in such settings. One facilitator’s native language was other than English.

An exciting development is the investigators who successfully completed the Getting Ahead program and then have become facilitators in their various home communities. Original facilitators systematically and carefully identified Getting Ahead graduates who might have facilitator potential. Over time facilitators who were initially “recruited” from the investigator ranks have become strong and very effective facilitators; many of them continue with the program today. At least half of the current facilitators are graduates of the program.

The program coordinators believe that there are some basic criteria for the development of facilitators’ skills:

- Successful facilitators must have a basic belief in the constructs of the Getting Ahead program.
- Facilitators must truly believe that they are in fact “facilitators” during the program and not in charge of “teaching” the curriculum.
- They must believe that people really do have the capacity to change their own lives. One facilitator identifies this belief as “unconditional positive regard” for others.
- All facilitators must be committed to the communities in which they live and work—and know well the residents and resources there.
- Facilitators with various skill sets can still facilitate the Getting Ahead program because the curriculum is strong enough on its own. One facilitator always tells us to “trust the curriculum.”
- Mentoring is an essential part of developing effective facilitators, especially those who come from the ranks of Getting Ahead graduates.

Evaluating the Getting Ahead Program

All goals that were set for the SSUF grant were far exceeded. The program was developed and delivered in all seven selected sites and served all 10 designated counties. The goal of the grant was that at least 90 TANF-eligible individuals would complete the Getting Ahead program by June 2011. By the end of the grant, 165 individuals had completed the program. Even though the numbers were impressive, the coordinators in each collaborating organization were well aware that just counting the numbers of individuals who graduated did not begin to capture the “real story” of the program’s success.

In early 2011, the Rural Solutions Board of Directors had the foresight and vision to hire Daniel Brisson, Ph.D., associate pro-
Professor in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver, to conduct an evaluation of the Northeast Colorado Getting Ahead program, which was being funded through the SSUF grant.

The evaluation involved the use of pre-test and post-test data collected on each investigator completing the program between January and June 2011 to assess changes that occurred to investigators over the course of the curriculum. Investigators were asked to fill out basic descriptive information about themselves, as well as a lifestyle survey. These pre-test and post-test data were analyzed to assess basic characteristics of investigators and to detect any reported changes, particularly in lifestyle, that occurred over the course of the program.

Focus groups also met at the beginning and conclusion with three separate Getting Ahead classes to examine more deeply the successes, stories, and challenges of the program. In addition, several individual interviews were conducted with investigators after they had completed the program.

From this sampling technique, 74 investigators participated in the Getting Ahead program in the first half of 2011 and were included in the evaluation. Brisson reported that:

- Rural Solutions relied on local knowledge and service provider referrals to identify investigators that seemed likely to benefit from the program. Due to this opportunistic sampling strategy, there was a wide range of characteristics describing investigators and limited exclusion categories for participation. (2011)

Other than residing in Northeast Colorado, the characteristic most common for investigators was that financial hardship was making day-to-day life a major struggle.

Of those reporting financial information, the average monthly income was $1,197. On average, investigators reported the hourly wage of their most recent job was $9.42. More than 50% of program participants reported they weren’t working at the start of the program, and only 20% reported they were working full time. Thirty-one percent of participants reported that they had not held a job the last 12 months.

On average, investigators were 37 years old when starting the program. Investigators reported the median number of persons in their household was three, and the median number of children in their household was two. Twenty-eight percent of investigators reported being married, and an additional 15% reported living with someone but not being married. Thirty-six percent of investigators reported being separated, divorced, or widowed, and 21% reported having never been married.

Brisson reported comments, such as the following, during interviews and focus groups at the beginning of the Getting Ahead programs:

- I don’t know who I am or what I want. I know I want to do something and be somebody, but I don’t know what that is. I am almost like needing guidance. Not like them to tell me what I need to be. I want to discover who I want to be.
• I’m just bouncing around with the waves, and I’m not getting anywhere, and I have no clue how to get to land. And that’s kind of where I’m at. I have no clue how to get to where I need to go or where I need to be.

• I got here because I am broke and pretty much, there is nothing right now I can do about it.

• Been a hell of a last four years. It’s just been an up and down of emotional issues, law, and what not. (2011)

Post-interviews with investigators who completed the program strongly supported that the Getting Ahead program was a success for them. They told a story of two important pieces coming together to make the Getting Ahead program work. The two pieces were, first, the educational and behavioral curriculum that taught people about class-driven values and the class system in our country. Second, the group process provided social support and a safe space for individuals to authentically examine themselves, their life, and the choices they make in life—and to make decisions about how best they want to move forward from this point. Getting Ahead is not intended to be group therapy, but sometimes aspects of that dynamic emerge as part of the process.

The evaluation report presented by Brisson (2011) to the Rural Solutions Board of Directors showed consistent positive benefits for participants in a number of areas. When investigators started the program, 60% of them reported that they were not working. When they completed the program, the number reporting that they were not working dropped to 42%. Additionally, investigators were asked to check a box indicating how many hours they worked per week during the previous month. At post-test there was a higher percentage of investigators working in each of the “hours worked” categories. The graph below provides an illustration of differences in the employment situation for investigators when they began the program compared with when they finished the program.

**Compare Hours Worked Per Week at Pre-Test and Post-Test**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not working</th>
<th>Working less than 15 hrs/wk</th>
<th>Working 15–19 hrs/wk</th>
<th>Working 20–29 hrs/wk</th>
<th>Working 30–40 hrs/wk</th>
<th>Working more than 40 hrs/wk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59.7%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage pre-test

Percentage post-test
The Power of the Program

Comments from investigators indicate the power of the curriculum and its ability to empower people (they were talking about the importance of the program):

- **Being able to organize my thoughts and process things—and prioritize what I want and no longer want and be able to walk away from that. And in doing that I was able to decide my career path. I am back in school now. I have completed two semesters and made honor roll. I am going to school to get my bachelor’s in psych and specializing in domestic violence groups.**

- **I mean, I have saved myself a lot of money. And over the next year it is all going to come back to me.**

- **I see the difference in the economic situation. I’m not the brightest guy in the world, but I made it. Teaches me where to put money [speaking about the Getting Ahead program], instead of just paying bills. Put some in the bank, some to my kids. I’ve learned to evaluate where my money is.**

- **I had this truck, I was getting like 12 miles to the gallon and then when I sit down and look at it I’m like, holy cow, I’m spending like $650 a month driving back and forth to Sterling. That’s more money than I spend [inaudible]. And I just got to the point that I was like I have to get rid of this vehicle. So I got this little car and I’m getting 39 miles to the gallon, and I’m stoked, and I’ve got all this money now to buy things and buy [names daughter] clothes and I got a promotion at work. So I’m making a little more money that way, and a lot of it was just my mindset. I mean, the way I take things for granted in my everyday life. I was just stuck in survival mode.**

A year later, a program coordinator reported about the Getting Ahead graduate quoted last above:

The newly divorced dad was trying to figure out which way to turn as the whole world seemed to be falling in on him. At one point we believed he was suicidal when he first began seeking assistance with rent/ utilities. He focused on his young daughter and began taking not only the Getting Ahead program but the Nurturing Fatherhood class. He made some changes in his life, specifically giving up his truck and getting a smaller more gas-efficient model so he could cut costs and better provide for his daughter. This father is now co-facilitating a Nurturing Fatherhood class.

In addition, other facilitators have reflected on the successes of the programs in which they were involved during the duration of the SSUF grant. One states:

My family was personally impacted by the information presented in the Getting Ahead class, for which I will be forever grateful! From our first Getting Ahead group, two families have left our county to move on to better financial situations, with one more family preparing to move this summer. One [individual who] participated has received a $3.45 an hour increase in pay. [Another] par-
DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING THE GETTING AHEAD PROGRAM IN NORTHEAST COLORADO

Participant, after being encouraged by the group, is now working and being paid ¾ time. One participant has been promoted to a position where he closes the store. He gained trust and responsibility. I like how many participants come to class thinking that it is a balance-your-checkbook-style class and are amazed [that] it is so-o-o-o much more than that.

A second facilitator from an agency partner made these observations from her organization:

The outcome [that] is most amazing to me—and shows me that this program really works—is the following: All of the families who have participated in the Getting Ahead program have decreased if not ceased the use of our services, when before they were accessing the services we provide as often as possible.

Lifestyle Survey Outcomes

Investigators also filled out pre-test and post-test surveys on lifestyle choices. While some of the expected outcomes of the Getting Ahead program may take months and even years to achieve (e.g., earning a college degree, building up a savings account, landing a better paying job), assessing changes in investigators’ attitudes toward their lifestyle choices were easier to see in a shorter time frame. The study assessed investigators’ attitudes from when they began the program to when they completed the program and found a number of important improvements.

Investigators were asked to rate their agreement with a number of questions on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is equal to “Not at all,” 2 is equal to “Not often,” 3 is equal to “Not sure,” 4 is equal to “Most of the time,” and 5 is equal to “Always.” Using a statistical analysis technique known as a t-test, the evaluators were able to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions of lifestyle from pre-test to post-test. In other words, evaluators were able to determine to what degree investigators experienced real changes in their lifestyle during their time in the Getting Ahead program.

The t-test results show that investigators did experience real change on the following items during their time in the program.

- I pay my bills without doing anything illegal (pre-test mean = 3.20; post-test mean = 3.69)
- My family and I are living safe from violence (pre-test mean = 4.29; post-test mean = 4.71)
- I am able to get what I need by talking to someone (pre-test mean = 3.60; post-test mean = 3.83)
- I encourage my children to attend college (pre-test mean = 4.42; post-test mean = 4.61)
- I have a savings account (pre-test mean = 2.31; post-test mean = 2.90)
- I have support from people outside my family (pre-test mean = 3.82; post-test mean = 4.17)
The graph below shows the pre-test and post-test scores for each of the items on which investigators improved significantly.

Mean Improvements in Perceptions of Lifestyle at Post-Test

As part of the survey, investigators also were asked, “In the last month, how many days did you feel down or discouraged?” At pre-test, 33% of investigators said they felt down or discouraged “five or more times per month,” which was the highest category provided. At post-test the percentage responding that they felt down or discouraged five times or more decreased to 19%. This decrease may symbolize the impact of the group social support process that usually occurs in the Getting Ahead program. The social support provided by participation in the program was reported to be a major reason investigators felt the program was successful.

Felt Down or Discouraged Five or More Times in the Past Month
One very encouraging result of the evaluation revealed a trend indicating that investigators were becoming more financially literate as a result of the Getting Ahead program. At pre-test, 23% reported that there were “not sure” if their housing was affordable, and 21% reported that they were “not sure” if their transportation was affordable. At post-test the percentage of investigators reporting they were “not sure” if their house was affordable declined to 10%, and the percentage reporting there were “not sure” if their transportation was affordable declined to 9%.

Qualitative Themes

The quantitative results suggest the program is very successful for participants, but those close to the program know that hearing the stories (anecdotal evidence) of investigators is an equally convincing method of determining the program’s success. After completing the program, every interviewed investigator reported that the program was deeply important to his or her life.

Investigators gained insight into a value system that was largely unavailable to them before. The value system might broadly be considered a middle-class value system, but more specifically might be described as an understanding of financial systems, communication systems, educational systems, and problem-solving systems. Findings from this evaluation revealed that program investigators were glad to learn about the class-driven system, along with values that are implicitly part of the middle class—but mostly unavailable to participants enmeshed in a cycle of poverty. The following investigator statements about what stood out to them the most regarding Getting Ahead reveal how the program provided a doorway into a value system that investigators believe will allow them to finally “get ahead” in life.

- **Well, you know, one of the things was knowledge of the hidden rules. You have to forgive me [evident emotion]. The way things work and the way society thinks of things … I have a lot of emotions around that. I struggled with those things, and understanding how those things work is kind of an eye-opening experience, I guess. I can get around a little better, I guess, and make a better life for me and [names daughter].**

- **She [the facilitator] wanted us to list the things we wanted to change. Once I started writing those things down, trying to work on those goals, making sure I didn’t get stuck, and saying that is never gonna work … Now I see things differently.**

- **I’ve got a ways to go, but I have goals now, real goals. I want to go back to school. I want to make a better life for me and my daughter. If it’s just going to be me and her, then I’m already headed that way.**

- **The stages of change. Even though I knew I had to change parts of my thinking, but when it was broken down into those steps, I was able to work through it a little. There are hidden rules when it comes to writing an application for a job.**
• **Stages of change:** The mental model gives you a visual.

• **The way the course is laid out:** Formal and casual registers. The different social classes and how they view things: speak, dress, act. And if you want to break into those classes, you have to play the game. And then ending with the goals. The way it was laid out was very powerful.

• **How society perceives different classes of people.** I’ve learned how to associate with those people.

‘Almost Like Group Therapy’

In addition to the educational component, there was also a strong clinical component to the work done by investigators in the Getting Ahead program. The clinical component might look almost like group therapy, with investigators sharing life stories and supporting others in a similar situation. This group process seemed to happen each week when investigators were given the chance to regularly focus on themselves and look more deeply to see where they are being successful and where they are falling short—in terms of their own aspirations.

In investigators’ words, this is what the group process felt like:

• **I called this the finding-me class.** Now I know I have a voice. I will go to the school and speak up.

• **I had been searching and searching for answers for a long time.** It was that key that gave [me] permission—that I could care for myself … I thought [the program] was going to be like school, but instead it was social.

• **Shows you life is hard, but I think we have to do it because you find out you’re not the only one.** You have something in common with others.

• **I put up a real good front. I’m a real good BS’er.**

• **I think this group is communication.** Because, you know, when you stay at home you don’t do a lot. But here there is communication. And then the second part is “permission” to be able to do self-care.

• **I think the biggest challenge for a lot of us in here is going to be change.** Figuring ourselves out.

• **Well, yeah, I didn’t expect any of it.** I wasn’t expecting to get emotional about this class. I wasn’t expecting to get angry about the way things are in my life.

• **I would love for there to be a specific word … I would say it’s a journey.**

Lessons Learned

Rural Solutions and its collaborating organizations believe that there are several powerful lessons to be learned from the Getting Ahead program that may strengthen the program and make it more effective in Northeast Colorado.

• **In his final report, Brisson (2011) clearly identified the aspects of the Getting Program that are most critical for the program’s success in this rural region:**
The evaluation revealed that two aspects of the program seem to be critical for its success. The first part is the basic curriculum, which provides educational and behavioral lessons on what we are broadly calling a middle-class value system in this evaluation. Some of the lessons that seemed to be particularly important for investigators were about: (1) hidden rules, (2) stages of change, (3) social capital and social networks, and (4) goal development. The second part of the curriculum that seems to be critical was the therapeutic process that occurred when investigators participated in a group process with their peers who were facing similar life difficulties. The therapeutic process seemed to give investigators a chance to focus on themselves and the choices they have made in life, while the group provided an accountability structure.

- For the Getting Ahead program to be successful in any community, large or very small and rural, the program must be locally grounded. Local human services agencies must understand the challenges that families who have financial challenges and few resources face each day. Local agencies also must understand their role in how to break the cycle of poverty for their clients and other residents. The program must be community-based in order to bring together these agencies, the business community, the faith community, and other individuals and groups who can build resources in their individual communities.
- There is a strong need to continue to build a strong core group of effective Getting Ahead program facilitators. Rural Solutions and its collaborating organizations must continue the mentoring and education process to develop their skills and be very deliberate and strategic in supporting them. As with the investigators in this program, the facilitation process is also a “journey.”
- It has become apparent that there is a need for some sort of follow-up work, perhaps a continuing “support group,” after the curriculum is completed. Most investigators state they feel they would benefit greatly if the group could continue to meet for social support once the class ends. It might be useful for Rural Solutions to work with former investigators to create some mechanisms whereby investigators can meet voluntarily as they continue to work toward their goals.
- There also is a need for ongoing evaluation of program components with former investigators. One area that has been identified as particularly important for future evaluation is the need to assess the program at the six-month follow-up stage and the two-year follow-up stage in order to better understand long-term outcomes of the program. A few outcomes that would be worth assessing over a longer follow-up period include: (1) savings, (2) educational outcomes, and (3) wages.
And the stories keep coming! The facilitator for one of the classes currently being conducted in one of the small communities in the region, gives us this status update. She reports that there are “awesome success stories coming from this group.” The investigators in the class are having “so much fun with the hidden rules.” A worker from the Workforce Center came to the class and helped the investigators develop résumés. One person has been ill and is now feeling better and just found a part-time job. A woman with multiple sclerosis started working by cooking for the elderly in a nearby town, and she feels “so much better and happy.” One young woman just passed her GED test, and she’s looking forward to getting a full-time job.

The success of the Getting Ahead program in Northeast Colorado shows no signs of abating. I feel honored to be part of this exciting, life-changing endeavor.

References


Jacalyn Reynolds has served as executive director of Rural Solutions, a nonprofit that serves the 10 counties in rural Northeast Colorado, for almost seven years. She earned her bachelor’s degree in Education and English from Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado, and her master’s degree from University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado. Reynolds is a retired public school teacher. She also served as director for the department of social services in a small county in the region before becoming executive director of Rural Solutions.
FOR MORE THAN A DECADE Louisiana has ranked No. 1 in the world for incarcerating its citizens. One in 86 adults in Louisiana is in the prison system. High poverty rates and low educational attainment exacerbate the problem. Twenty-eight percent of our citizens live at or below the poverty level, and another 24% are “asset poor,” which means they would be unable to subsist at poverty level for three months without income. Only 82% of our citizens graduate from high school, making Louisiana No. 47 in graduation rates in the U.S. In order to address the issues of high incarceration rates, the gap in educational attainment, and poverty in the community, Refined By Fire Ministries (RBF) has garnered very promising results with the implementation of Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (DeVol, 2006) and The R Rules (Souther, 2008) in Louisiana prisons. RBF’s Reentry Benefiting Families initiative expands the scope of the organization’s work to provide substantive programming that assists offenders and families impacted by the criminal justice system in discovering paths out of poverty for themselves.

In 2009 our organization became aware of the Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) philosophy and the Getting Ahead curriculum. When I shared the information with the RBF board of directors and my husband, Michael, who is employed as director of Reentry at Dixon Correctional Institute (DCI)—Michael is also RBF’s corrections liaison—I received unanimous support to immerse the organization in the Bridges® philosophy and implement the Getting Ahead™ program. To that end, Michael and I, along with...
RBF’s chairman, Cleve Fontenot, underwent the Bridges and Getting Ahead certification trainings. Knowing that a key piece of this new initiative would be to provide the programs in a prison setting, we began having discussions with the administration at DCI, where RBF was already providing life skills programs, about piloting Getting Ahead at the all-male adult prison. This would be the first time in the state of Louisiana that a Getting Ahead program would be implemented in a state correctional facility.

Implementing Bridges and Getting Ahead

The initial challenges were to convince the administration to allow the program to be brought into the prison, to implement the program, and to gain the trust and commitment of participating offenders to complete the program. Due to RBF’s long relationship with the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC) and Michael’s staff position at DCI, gaining approval was not difficult after we submitted a proposal detailing the constructs and intended outcomes of the program and how it could be implemented. RBF was also fortunate to have a private foundation that funded projects in the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, area to provide seed money to purchase workbooks and to pay for our Bridges and Getting Ahead certification training.

After we gained approval to pilot the program at DCI, and while we waited to complete our training, Michael and I began providing the FDIC Money Smart financial management curriculum to a group of 20 offenders with the intention of transitioning to Getting Ahead at the completion of the course. The criteria for selection of the initial group of offenders were based on the offenders’ participation in pre-release programming and other life skills programs provided by RBF. The Money Smart program, which teaches fundamental financial literacy skills, helped the participating offenders gain competence in financial matters as well as confidence in being able to discipline themselves to participate in a more intense program like Getting Ahead.

To assist participants in staying organized with their materials and homework assignments, as well as to begin teaching them time management skills, RBF provided each participant with a Getting Ahead workbook, a 12-month calendar, a calculator, pens, pencils, writing paper, and a portfolio to keep all their materials in. These items, which are not readily available in the prison, were approved by security to be brought into the prison for the participants. The classes were scheduled so that we met with the group once a week for two hours in the evening. This insured the Getting Ahead class did not conflict with other education programs (which are held during the day) or with work assignments. Additionally, RBF trained six offender peer facilitators in small group facilitation skills and provided them with additional training in Getting Ahead. They served as co-facilitators/investigators for the initial group. The peer facilitators were extremely helpful as the class participants had continual access to them if
they wanted to go over concepts they may not have understood in class or get help with homework.

At the same time that we were piloting Getting Ahead, the Louisiana Department of Corrections began allowing for good time (days off of sentences) for life skills programs that had been certified by the department. RBF submitted a program design in which offenders complete both Getting Ahead and FDIC Money Smart, and it was approved by the DOC. Since providing a monetary stipend (an important feature of Getting Ahead) is prohibited in the prison setting, the offer of receiving good time for successful completion of both programs gave participants a well deserved reward for their time commitment.

Sixty-five participants at DCI have completed the FDIC Money Smart classes, and 24 have completed Getting Ahead. Additionally, the six offender peer facilitators who were trained to co-facilitate the programs have been encouraged to connect with RBF’s community-based efforts upon their release.

The released participants always say how different their lives are now because of what they learned. Follow-up contact with participants who have been released is difficult because it is on a volunteer basis, but we have been able to stay in contact with five prior participants. Here are a few comments from some of the participants:

Walter (not released yet/ served as peer facilitator): “I had never looked at my life like I have now. Learning about the resources I need to take better care of my family and to keep me from coming back has really changed how I look at life.”

Gillis (recently released): “I have put into action all that I learned from the Solutions to Poverty programs while at DCI. I am back driving a truck and am moving towards having my own rig and starting my business again. I would not have been able to make these accomplishments so fast if I had not learned how to manage my money, as well as how to make better choices with my finances. I am now sharing these concepts with my family and trying to help them to do better too.”

Valrice (recently released): “What would I have done after being locked up for 20 years had I not learned what I did about...”
the poverty mindset? I had never had a checking account or thought about a budget. I’m living my dream of starting a boxing club, and things are going great for me. I’m using the Getting Ahead concepts with the young men that are training with me, and I’m seeing them change their thinking. I cannot say enough thank-yous to RBF for letting me into the program. It truly has saved my life!”

For the 10 individuals who are still incarcerated at DCI, we can report that all have remained write-up free, three have become members of the Toastmasters Club, and three are now members of the Jaycees. All are pursuing additional education or training in a trade offered at the prison through the Louisiana Vocational Technical College.

Due to the program’s growing reputation as a result of updates provided at warden meetings and the unofficial prison grapevine carrying the very favorable comments of the participants, another prison facility located near DCI, the State Police Barracks, invited RBF to provide the program at the facility. This facility houses more than 200 trustee offenders who work in the state police headquarters, various other state department offices, and the governor’s mansion, all located in Baton Rouge.

To date, 22 trustees have completed both the Getting Ahead and FDIC Money Smart curriculums, and an additional 21 offenders are participating at the time of this writing. Two of our trained peer facilitators from DCI have been moved to the barracks, and they are assisting as co-facilitators for the classes. The peer facilitators continue to be effective as they are able to provide assistance to class members as the need arises. Since the majority of the offenders housed at the barracks are those with longer sentences, only one of the participants has been released since we began providing the program. Though funding remains an issue for us, RBF has recently become an aha! Process local authorized consultant, and we are hopeful that our funding will increase as we receive technical support from aha! Process’s consultants to design an improved data gathering system.

The R Rules

With the overwhelmingly positive results of using the Bridges philosophy and Getting Ahead program, RBF embarked on providing another aha! Process program—The R Rules, developed and authored by Elizabeth W. Souther, an educator who has worked for the Farmington (New Mexico) Municipal Schools since 1989. The R Rules was designed for middle and high school students to assist them in using critical thinking to develop learning skills and resources. RBF chose to pilot the program at DCI by targeting younger offenders incarcerated at the adult male facility. In September 2011, five young offenders ranging in age from 18–22, along with three veteran peer facilitators who were graduates of Getting Ahead, began The R Rules program.

The main purpose of The R Rules is to help under-resourced young people who feel they are trapped in a life of poverty and have no future story. RBF staff members
have observed this mindset in the majority of the offender population, whether young or old. The lack of strong parent/child attachment while growing up, dropping out of school at a young age, and the absence of healthy relationships with caring adults has set these individuals on a trajectory of bad choices and mired them in poverty, drug abuse, and other criminogenic behavior. The R Rules helps participants develop a future picture—a mental model of the future they wish to have—and identify and build resources to reach that desired future.

The fundamental premise of the program was created to answer a philosophy first offered by charter school pioneer Grant East, \( R - R = R \), or Rules minus Relationships equals Rebellion. Souther, drawing on her lengthy background as an educator, incorporated the Bridges and Getting Ahead concepts and research into the design of The R Rules, and answered East’s formula with one of her own: \( R + R + R = R + R + R \), or Rules plus Relationships plus Rigor equals Resources plus Results plus Respect. To address the negative aspects that many under-resourced young people have encountered in their lives, The R Rules helps participants “flip the script” and uses concepts and exercises to support the more positive formula application of \( R + R + R = R + R + R \).

The interactive structure of the curriculum is designed to assist hard-to-reach individuals to be more quickly engaged, to change their negative thinking, to become more self-sufficient through the development of healthy relationships, and to improve their critical-thinking and decision-making skills. The use of future pictures can guide decisions, help control impulsivity, be used to translate abstract concepts to concrete actions, and can motivate the individuals to undertake additional rigor in their efforts to make their picture of a better future a reality.

I participated in the class, as did Alex Barras, a Louisiana State University intern who comes from an upper-middle-class family. Alex’s father is Taylor Barras, a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives. Representative Barras also attended the class and interacted with the participants, a highlight of the program according to the participants’ comments. The pilot class participants were selected with input from the peer facilitators, who interacted with the young offenders on a regular basis to establish ongoing mentoring relationships outside of the classroom. In just the first four weeks of the initial class, we saw remarkable shifts in mindsets and deeper relationships being forged with and by these young offenders.

Additional activities were introduced into the program, which included providing the participants with books on their areas of interest (ranging from learning Spanish to the history of hip-hop to biographical information on successful people like Tyler Perry, Hill Harper, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.). The program was very successful, and the young men, as well as the facilitators, benefited from the experience. As a final assignment, the participants were asked to write a summary of their experience while going through the pro-
program and how they felt they benefited. Below are some excerpts from those letters.

Anthony: “This class has given me an entirely different view of the world. In prison I never felt like thinking of my future and making plans. Now I know I have to, and I have the information that will help me do it. I also never thought I would have the resources to start studying Spanish like I have dreamed of doing. Getting the Spanish book from Mrs. E. and developing relationships with Hispanic offenders has made that dream come true. I want to be an interpreter in the future, and I’m on my way to being able to do that now.”

Kevin: “Realizing that building relationships is what helps build resources in my life is something that I now know I’ve been missing and will help me when I get to go home.”

Al: “Finding out that I am really a good problem solver was one of the “aha” moments I had. This class showed me that my mind is like a parachute; it only works when it is open. I know now I can shoot for my goals, and I have talents that will help me reach those goals.”

Quarion: “I really did not like the class at first. With all the talk about relationships and discussions, I thought it was all kind of mushy. But after a while I realized I was changing my thinking. I really enjoyed learning about financial things too. I never knew about checking accounts or banks before. I also feel the information about colleges and how to get help to enroll made me realize I can do this, and I want to continue to learn.”

Implementing these programs in a prison setting brings with it some unique aspects and considerations. From our experience we offer the following tips:

• A previous direct-service partnership with a correctional facility is important to gain approval and support from the administration, as well as the trust of the offender population, which insures their interest in participating. Be prepared to provide the administration with an overview of the program, a timeline for implementation, and specific needs (meeting space, schedule, materials to be utilized, etc.).

• At least two trained facilitators should work with an initial group of no more than 20 participants. With the two facilitators, the larger group can be broken down into smaller groups for discussion purposes.

• Peer facilitators with strong communication and leadership skills can be identified in the first group of participants. Peer facilitators who have already been trained to help with other programs at the prison may also be a good fit.

• Material resources should include, at the minimum, a workbook for each participant, a writing tablet, and pens/pencils. The additional materials mentioned earlier in this article (calendar, calculator, portfolio) are discretionary, but we highly recommend using them if they are allowed by the facility.

• Classes should be scheduled weekly with a minimum two-hour time slot.
• In selecting participants for Getting Ahead, we recommend individuals age 20 and up who have completed other self-help programs successfully and who are approaching release (at least one year out).

• For The R Rules, a younger population is suggested (15–20 years old) who may never have taken self-help or life skills programs before and may have longer than one year before release. The R Rules is useful in helping younger offenders “get their heads on right” and motivating them to get a GED or enroll in other self-help programs.

Now that RBF has piloted both Getting Ahead and The R Rules, we are working to implement community-based programs by late 2012. We have developed collaborations with key agencies in the greater Baton Rouge area and in northeast Louisiana, an area of the state that has a 30% poverty rate in much of the region. Additionally, RBF has recently become an aha! Process local area consultant so that we can offer assistance and support to other community agencies using aha! Process programs and strategies.

The biggest problem we have encountered is training more staff and volunteers to replicate the program, as we are receiving requests weekly from correctional facilities and community groups who want to implement programs and train staff. We have garnered a high level of interest from community leaders and organizations, and now we must find those individuals and agencies that are willing and able to join us at the table with their own resources so we can work together to meet the needs of the community.

The future of our organization is bright in terms of establishing a strong foundation in the area of leadership and effective programming focused on results (for more information and results, visit our website at www.rbf.la). As an organization, we have embraced the Bridges Out of Poverty philosophy fully and have done our due diligence in receiving training from the experts at aha! Process. Experientially, over the past two years, we have observed that providing offender populations and under-resourced individuals access to financial empowerment education that includes coming alongside individuals to provide the tools they need to move from poverty to prosperity helps them gain a clearer understanding of how poverty impacts their lives and the lives of others, especially their children. Our unique approach helps lower the incidence of family violence and intergenerational criminogenic behavior, ensuring a better quality of life for our clients and the communities in which they will live, work, and raise their children.
Elain Ellerbe has more than 25 years of business management experience. For the past 15 years she has focused on human and social services, and she is presently CEO of Refined By Fire Ministries, a nonprofit she and her family founded in 1995.

In 2010 Ellerbe received her certification as a trainer/facilitator of Bridges Out of Poverty and Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World. In July 2012 Ellerbe led RBF through the process of becoming a local area consultant agency for aha! Process. RBF’s territory to date includes Ouachita Parish and the nine-parish area surrounding Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Ellerbe’s husband of 35 years, Michael, is director of Reentry at Dixon Correctional Institute and is also a certified Bridges/Getting Ahead trainer.

References


Getting Started

COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP (CAP) is a private, nonprofit organization serving 10 counties in northern Idaho and one county in southeastern Washington. Created during the “war on poverty” in the 1960s, CAP is one of nearly a thousand similar organizations across the United States providing a variety of anti-poverty programs to those in need. CAP was incorporated in 1966 and had a number of directors until the early 1990s, when a new director was chosen to lead the agency, which was on the edge of crisis. During the tenure of that director, CAP changed from being an agency potentially at risk to one that was thriving. New funding sources were found and new programs were started. Strong policies and procedures were implemented to insure fiscal, legal, and programmatic compliance.

When I began my tenure as executive director of CAP, I inherited a highly regarded, fiscally strong, and programmatically successful agency. I had been part of the success of the agency for 10 years prior to being hired as the director, and it would have been easy to continue to be a good manager and run an effective and efficient agency that provided necessary, helpful services for low-income members of our service area.

Three things happened that transformed how I viewed my role, my work, and the larger work of CAP. First, fairly close to the time that I became the director, I attended a workshop on the history of the community action movement. I heard about the roots of the movement and the expectations for the work of community action at its inception. I was inspired by

The Power of Transformation

by Lisa Stoddard
the original vision for community action and started thinking about getting back to my agency “roots.” Also, during my first year as the executive director of CAP, I started putting together some data on poverty in the local area. One of the most disheartening statistics I found was that the percentage of people living in poverty in our 11-county service area had remained virtually unchanged over the preceding three decades. Then, near the end of my first year as director, I attended a conference for community action agencies and heard an agency director talk about her work to move her agency from an internal focus on services to an external focus on the issue of poverty. I was inspired by her vision for the work of her community action agency, and when I left the conference, I held onto her contact information.

It took a couple of months, but I finally got up the nerve to call her and ask to speak to her more about the work she was doing. While I was inspired by the work she had described, I was hesitant to call. I was an effective manager. I understood and believed I had what it took to run efficient programs that delivered necessary services to people. Also, I recognized that I was more of an introvert than an extrovert. Engaging the entire community in an effort to end poverty definitely seemed like work better suited for an extrovert! The first challenge in this process was deciding that my own uncertainty about whether or not I could do the work shouldn’t stand in the way because the work was too important. That started both a personal transformation and an organizational transformation that have entirely changed the way CAP does business, bringing us to the table with new partners, infusing our work with new money, and realizing individual and community outcomes that have a real, demonstrable impact on poverty.

**Key Resources**

During my conversation with the community action director I’d heard speak at the conference, I discovered that she was working with a consulting organization called Move the Mountain Leadership Center (MTM). MTM is composed of a number of former community action staff who had identified the need for community action agencies to develop strategic vision and utilize high-impact strategies to really get to the root causes of poverty. MTM was working with organizations on a process of transformational leadership, and I signed CAP up to work with them.

Getting connected with a consultant was an essential first step toward both personal and organizational transformation. When I was “raised up” in CAP, there was a culture of self-reliance. We viewed ourselves as smart, competent self-starters who could figure things out on our own. That had served us well; we’d built programs, systems, processes, and procedures that had stabilized—and then grown—our agency. So, a major shift in organizational culture and vision required outside expertise, and getting connected with MTM, their transformational leadership process, and a coach was key to our success.

The transformational leadership process began with the first step of creating a
leadership agenda and vision. I had been involved in a biennial needs assessment process at CAP since I was hired, but creating my leadership agenda required a new level of immersion in the question of what it was really like to live in poverty in northern Idaho/southeastern Washington. Instead of a rudimentary survey of services accessed, unmet needs, and gaps in service delivery, I began to analyze data, read reports, and ask questions of stakeholders about how poverty impacted people and the communities in which we lived. I began to develop a case for change that included the current reality of poverty and its impacts on our community.

My case for change also explored what would happen if we did nothing differently, and how people, the communities in which we lived and worked, and our agency would look if we became strategic about addressing the root causes of poverty. This was accomplished with ongoing coaching and support from Eileen Wallace, an MTM consultant. Eileen challenged me to develop and lay out a vision for CAP’s work that would enlarge and enhance our scope and move us from an internally focused service delivery organization to one with a vision of community engagement and a mission of being a catalyst and a convener that would both inspire and equip people in our community to end poverty.

Once I had developed and could articulate my leadership agenda, the next step was to lay that vision out for CAP staff and board members. Prior to working for CAP, I taught English at the junior high level. That prepared me well for presenting in front of groups when I went to work for CAP. However, I can’t remember ever being more nervous than when I was presenting this new vision for our programs and participants, our community, and our agency to CAP’s staff and board members. Led by our consultant, we followed that presentation up by spending the next few months digesting this new vision and delving into what it would mean. We discussed what this change would mean to our clients, our funders, our programs, and our work as staff and board members. We discussed the reality of what would happen if we did nothing differently. We’d still be a highly regarded, stable, fiscally sound organization providing good and necessary services to individuals and families struggling with poverty. But we also discussed the benefits of having the entire community engaged in our work—work that would expand from just safety net services to projects and programs that would serve as building blocks to move people out of poverty. We discussed what scared us about this new vision. We wondered aloud if we would still have jobs, if programs that we cared about would still exist, what would happen if we failed.

In the end we decided to take a leap of faith and jump into our new shared vision with both feet. During this time there were many points at which we could have backed away and maintained the status quo. But our financial investment in consulting services for guidance, coaching, and accountability was money well spent. It kept us on track and moving forward, and it bolstered our courage when needed.
Team Building

My initial work on developing and articulating my leadership agenda was the last time I worked on CAP’s vision and transformation alone. To that point my work at CAP had been largely autonomous. Our culture was one that encouraged autonomous decision making and work. Growing my professional skills in that culture provided me with a lot of expertise in working autonomously, and I saw myself as solely responsible for outputs and outcomes. Our new vision included a culture change from one of autonomous work done in “silos” to one of shared vision, responsibility, and success that would be carried out in teams. Although embedding this entirely new view, which included a shift to shared work at a team level, was difficult, our early culture allowed many of us to see ourselves as change agents. That belief—that we could individually make effective changes—has proven to be powerful as we work in teams to make collective changes.

The first team we formed was an agency leadership team. That team was originally composed of the agency department directors who were viewed as leaders in our traditional, hierarchical organizational structure. As our first attempt at furthering the work of our shared vision through a team approach, we had a lot to learn about how to build high-functioning, cross-program teams. We learned some essential skills like group guidelines, accountability to the team, and creating rituals that help balance relationship building with task completion, but the transition was complicated. It was hard to move from autonomous work to shared work, from supervisory accountability to team accountability. It was hard to move from the isolated work of departments focused only on service delivery as outlined in contracts to work aligned with a shared vision of our community working together to insure that every community member reached full potential.

There were growing pains, and some of the original leadership team members stepped off of the team to be replaced by staff members who were not traditional department leaders according to our organizational chart but who were emerging leaders ready to embrace the new vision for our work. There was a huge challenge in putting this team together and growing it into a team of leaders who understood that, while their programmatic responsibility to funders and contracts remained, there was an all-encompassing, shared responsibility to the work of bringing all the stakeholders to the table to have a significant impact on poverty in our community.

Strategic Focus

Early on the agency leadership team began developing high-impact strategies by investing in training and coaching to hone our new skill set. We learned to evaluate potential strategies against high-impact criteria, and each strategy was evaluated for its ability to change the mindset of the community, change the goals of systems, and empower people to self-organize. As we developed our strategies, we focused
on two other key principles: (1) the importance of community building in everything we do, and (2) people living in poverty are the experts on the issues of poverty and, as such, need to be an integral part of strategy teams focused on furthering the larger vision of a community where all people have enough money, enough friends, and enough meaning in their lives to thrive.

These key principles became a real, integral part of our work once we got connected to aha! Process and the Bridges Out of Poverty (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi-Smith, 2006) constructs. For the first time we understood that our work must necessarily engage people from all economic classes and sectors of our community in ways that are meaningful and high-impact if we are going to achieve our vision. The constructs from Bridges® served as a foundation for building knowledge and increasing commitment to community-based projects that engage people from all economic classes in our work to end poverty. Strategies developed during this part of the transformational process included helping people to develop and maintain assets as a way to leave (or stay out of) poverty; building relationships across race, age, economic, and cultural lines to end poverty; developing leaders within and outside CAP from across economic, age, race, and cultural lines whose efforts would be focused on ending poverty; and creating a synchronized, innovative organization leading efforts to end poverty.

Existing agency programs were evaluated for alignment with the new strategies. While we were committed to letting go of programs and services that didn’t align with our new strategic approach, letting go proved difficult to do. That process brought up a lot of feelings in the leadership team that made it hard to actually let anything go. We had been facilitating those programs effectively and efficiently for a long time. We were attached to those programs. Also, it felt like we would be admitting that we had been doing things incorrectly up to that point if we let go of any particular program.

Call it “institutional pride” perhaps, but it took us a number of years to finally let go of any programs, systems, or structures. In fact, we are still working on doing that when and if it makes the most sense, while at the same time we are working to change our longstanding programs in ways that heighten their impact. Much of our service delivery work is composed of programs that we’ve been doing for many years, programs that are part of the community action network’s traditional service delivery system. These contracts provide us with a level of stability and support...
that is important, so instead of letting all of those programs fall away, we are continually working to embed Bridges constructs in the programs in order to increase their ability to change how people think, create better outcomes, and help people achieve self-sufficiency.

We’ve used this new skill set not only to help us deliver our existing programs in a way that creates higher impact, but also to guide us in developing projects that are based on Bridges concepts, align to high-impact criteria, and meet desired outcomes. This has become part of the way we do business. New projects are structured so that they are high-impact and outcome-oriented. Although we didn’t lose entire programs in the process of alignment, we did redirect resources, and we continue to do that to a greater and greater extent as we get better at this process and as our outcomes improve.

One example is a project we are working on with an elementary school in the Lewiston school district. The Mountain Lions Learning Zone is a project focused on increasing proficiency at grade level for elementary school children. CAP has seeded the project with agency funds and has hired a coordinator who is working directly with the school. The after-school learning club pairs volunteers from the high school and from the community with children who qualify for free and reduced lunch. The goal of the project is to provide additional social capital and academic support to students and their families in order to increase grade-level proficiency. Not only does the project provide consistent and regular academic support to the school students who are participating, but the parents participate in Love and Logic parenting classes and family nights at the school. With parents more comfortable being connected to the school and their children’s academic success, and with consistent volunteer academic support for students, every student who is participating has made gains toward proficiency. Parents are reporting that attitudes toward school, grades, and behavior have all improved.

Seeding projects such as this is a new way of working for CAP. Money that in the past would have been directed toward staff time, overhead costs, and assistance with basic needs has been scaled back so there is seed money for this type of high-impact project, and we are challenged to find a balance. While assistance with basic needs remains important, it will never lead to our desired outcome of moving people out of poverty. Finding the balance between providing for
basic needs and funding community sustainability projects continues to be a challenge, as the resources are limited and the needs are great.

Since 2005 we have honed our ability to structure projects, both new and existing, to meet desired outcomes. We no longer have to write out detailed outcomes and performance targets like we did when we started—thinking in terms of outcomes is automatic. In fact, we have six agreed-upon target outcomes under which all of our work falls. We don’t start anything new unless it aligns to a target outcome. Every aspect of our work is intentional and is focused on achieving outcomes that involve our entire community in making sure that every member has enough relationships, resources, and reasons to thrive; that every community member reaches full potential; that every community member is valued; and all people are meeting their needs by utilizing their talents, potential, and passions.

When we began we recognized Bridges as a tool for community engagement. At our current stage in the process, we have come to understand Bridges as a conceptual framework whose application can impact the approach taken by a variety of partners from all sectors of our community to dramatically increase successful outcomes for people living in poverty. This has been a gradual shift in organizational culture, mindset, and skill set, and it’s only in retrospect that we can see how far we’ve come.

**New Relationships, New Resources, New Results**

This shift from an internally focused service delivery organization to an organization that is focused on working with our community to create high-impact strategies to end poverty has allowed us to thrive, specifically when we look at relationships, resources, and results. The way we do business has changed. We have relationships with community partners with whom we’ve never worked before. We have new financial and human resources. We have new results.

When we developed our initial strategic plan, CAP’s own organizational strategy involved becoming a caring, innovative, synchronized organization recognized as a local and national leader in the anti-poverty movement. This was the impetus for us to look around at who else was engaged in this movement and get connected. We maintained our connection with Move the Mountain and became part of its National Circles® Campaign, which is focused on building relationships across all sectors of the community to end poverty. Circles provides both a micro component to our anti-poverty work—people from all walks of life are engaged in supporting families living in poverty while they work through their individually developed plans to leave poverty—and a macro component—all the people involved in the Circles initiative work together to change systems that make it difficult for families to leave poverty.
We also got connected with aha! Process, the community work they are doing with Bridges, and the higher education work they are doing with Investigations into Economic Class in America (DeVol & Krodel, 2010). We connected with Cincinnati Works and looked at their model for building economic sustainability through stable employment. We spoke to Geoffrey Canada and examined his model of building economic security for entire neighborhoods. These relationships gave us models that provided both building blocks people could use to climb out of poverty and a model of community engagement that supported a systems-change approach to ending poverty. These models were what we pulled from to develop and enhance models of our own best practices that would work well in our community. As we developed those models, we began to build relationships with funders who were willing to help us test the models in our community.

As I write this in mid-2012, we are about 18 months into a project with the Clarkston, Washington, campus of Walla Walla Community College. The project is focused on the retention of low-income, first-generation students so that they successfully complete community college coursework that can help them gain new skills and obtain a better job or continue on with a four-year degree. We are using the Investigations into Economic Class in America curriculum with students eligible for federal TRIO funds, combined with poverty simulations and Bridges training for faculty and staff, to build shared understanding of the issue of poverty. An added benefit of the new programs is that they serve as a way to examine the hidden rules of the community college setting that might affect the achievement of low-income students. That project has been funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and preliminary results show increased retention year to year for students who complete Investigations. We’ve also seen changes in the attitudes and approaches of faculty and staff in thinking about and working with low-income students. As reported by Washington State University, which is evaluating the project, yearly retention data for the 2010–11 academic year indicate that we’ve achieved a 23% increase in retention for Investigations participants as compared with the Washington State Community College system. The Investigations class shows a rate of 68% yearly retention while the comparison group shows a 45% yearly retention rate.

Building on this success, we have partnered with Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho, to implement a similar model with an even greater focus on how Bridges constructs can be used to implement systems change that can increase achievement for under-resourced college students. Two workshops are planned on the campus of Lewis-Clark. Karla Krodel will train faculty, staff, and administrators in workshops titled “Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students” and “College Retention and Engagement—A Systems Approach” with a follow-up strategic planning session. Then a multidisciplinary team from Lewis-Clark and a few key CAP staff members will begin to examine systems across campus.
and develop a plan for systems change aimed at increased retention and completion for under-resourced students.

In addition to the grant from the Gates Foundation focused on retention of first-generation, low-income community college students, CAP has also recently received a grant from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation to implement a project with local employers focused on retaining low-wage workers in one job for one year so that they have opportunities for additional training, advancement, and increased economic stability. This project combines aspects of the Cincinnati Works employment retention model with Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (DeVol, 2006) coursework for low-wage workers. It also includes poverty simulation experiences and Bridges training for supervisory staff. It is our hope that employment supports and Getting Ahead™ training for low-wage workers, coupled with poverty simulations and Bridges training for supervisory staff, will increase retention of low-wage workers. This will help low-wage workers maintain consistent employment for at least one year and take advantage of opportunities for additional training and advancement while reducing the associated turnover cost for employers and building a more skilled workforce. This project marks the first time that CAP has worked directly with businesses in our community to address the issues of poverty. The target outcomes that CAP has developed for our community to address poverty are long term. While preliminary results show success for participants in many of the strategic projects we have implemented, those results for individuals and families are only half the battle. CAP must address the attitudes that have normalized poverty. Over the past three years, more than 800 people have participated in poverty simulations and Bridges training provided by CAP’s certified staff. Evaluation results from those community-based trainings show that more than 50% of attendees increased their understanding of what poverty is like in our community, more than 60% increased their understanding of poverty as a complex issue made up of a variety of causes, and 17% fewer participants believed that people themselves were generally solely responsible for whether or not they were poor. These kinds of results are encouraging as we work to change mindsets and change systems while providing high-impact strategies to help people reach target outcomes.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson we’ve learned is that if we invite people from our community into our work by describing desired outcomes that appeal to everyone, they are ready to come to the table and bring their resources (time, talent, and treasure) with them. This includes peo-
ple from every walk of life, from every economic class. We’ve learned that we can’t do this alone. In fact, the solutions become more impactful and multifaceted—and the results are richer—when everyone is included. We’ve learned that besides being a highly competent, fiscally responsible, and credible organization, we have to be the convener and the leader in addressing the root causes of poverty. We bring our expertise and we bring our relationships with the real experts, the people who are struggling every day in poverty, to the table. We must be the catalyst for inspiring and equipping others to bring their expertise, their relationships, and their resources to the table.

We’ve learned that just as the reasons that people are in poverty are complex, there is a multitude of solutions and strategies to address the issues. We’ve learned that you can change the response of the community by changing the conversation. While we had good community support when we were talking about poverty from a needs perspective (what people needed and the gaps in meeting those needs), the response has increased in every way (more partnerships, more resources, richer results) since we started talking about desired outcomes for every member of our community at every stage of their lives. Community Action Partnership’s Pipeline to End Poverty is producing results that are changing the mindset of the community, altering the goals of systems, and improving the ability of people to meet their needs. While this is a wide-ranging, long-term proposition, preliminary results indicate that our organizational transformation is fueling a lasting community transformation.

References


Lisa Stoddard has worked in community action for the past 18 years, serving as the executive director of a community-based, nonprofit community action agency for the last eight of those years. Stoddard has a degree in English with a Secondary Education emphasis from the University of Montana, and she is a Certified Community Action Professional (CCAP) and a Bridges Out of Poverty certified trainer.
### Comprehensive Community Approach to Poverty

**Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities**

**Audience:** Communities, organizations, agencies, businesses, colleges, courts, hospitals, etc.

**Needs/Issues/Problems addressed:**
- Government
- Nonprofit agencies

**Workshop Description:**
In this one-day workshop, participants will create a mental model of poverty, review poverty research, examine a theory of change, and analyze poverty through the prism of the hidden rules of class, resources, family structure, and language.

MORE on website

**Bridges to Sustainable Communities**

**Audience:** Bridges audiences meeting prerequisites.

**Needs/Issues/Problems addressed:**
- Comprehensive community approach to poverty
- Taking Bridges to the next level

**Workshop Description:**
Communities that want to achieve sustainability using aha! Process knowledge are encouraged to use a wide variety of aha! Process products and consultants to create communities where everyone can live well.

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Meet Your P-20 Goals with Professional Development Solutions

We have workshops, books, and other products in these areas that help you meet your needs.

Interventions

Engage and Graduate Your Secondary Students: Preventing Dropouts

**Audience:** Recommended for teachers and administrators grades 7–12.

**Needs/issues addressed:**
- Poverty
- Achievement gap
- Attendance/truancy
- Dropouts

**Workshop Description:** This workshop is for educators in grades 7–12 who want to design programs for student success with special emphasis on under-resourced learners.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

**Audience:** Recommended for K–12 teachers and administrators.

**Needs/issues addressed:**
- Achievement gap
- Special education

**Workshop Description:** Learn about the "what," the "why," and the "how" of Response to Intervention (RTI) and the under-resourced learner.

Research-Based Strategies

**Audience:** Recommended for instructional staff (teachers, classroom paraprofessionals).

**Needs/issues addressed:**
- Poverty
- Achievement gap
- Response to Intervention (RTI)

**Workshop Description:** A teacher-friendly workshop focused on serving under-resourced students. Research-Based Strategies provides educators with hands-on techniques that help them narrow and then eliminate the achievement gap for all students, but especially under-resourced students.

Consulting/Academic Coaching

**Audience:** Recommended for K–12 educators.

**Needs/issues addressed:**
- Achievement gap and accountability requirements
- Alternative school students
- Poverty/Title I

**Description:** Academic coaching is the follow-up and support provided to teachers through small group meetings. The small groups may include one or several grade levels at the elementary level, or one or several departments or content areas at the secondary level.

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Audience: Recommended for postsecondary faculty and staff.
Needs/issues addressed:
- Under-resourced college students

Workshop Description: Initial Workshop: A deeper understanding of the challenges—and strengths—that students from poverty bring to college will help faculty, staff, and administration create the conditions that make success achievable, not merely accessible.

Understanding and Engaging Under-Resourced College Students

Audience: Recommended for teams of postsecondary faculty, student services staff, administrators, and community partners.
Needs/issues addressed:
- Higher education
- Under-resourced college students, etc.

Workshop Description: Strategic Consulting is designed to help guide faculty and staff through the change process. Reshaping the higher education classroom and campus to more effectively serve under-resourced college students often requires substantial discussion, planning, and change management.

Investigations into Economic Class in America

Audience: College faculty, staff, and community members.
Needs/issues addressed:
- Higher education

Description: This workshop prepares participants to offer the Investigations curriculum to under-resourced college students. Participants explore the content processes and sequences within the text and develop the facilitation skills that allow students to take on the role of knowledge creator.

College Retention and Engagement—A Systems Approach

Audience: Recommended for teams of postsecondary faculty, student services staff, administrators, and community partners.
Needs/issues addressed:
- Higher education
- Under-resourced college students, etc.

Workshop Description: Colleges struggle with retaining and graduating under-resourced college students. This workshop presents the framework that many colleges are calling “Bridges to Graduation,” a systems approach to retention and graduation based on aha! Process’s field-tested constructs and best practices nationwide.

Strategic Consulting

Audience: Strategic consulting is appropriate for faculty, student support staff, and student representatives from a department, an academic school, multiple departments and schools, or an entire postsecondary institution.

Workshop Description: Strategic Consulting for Higher Education is designed to help guide faculty and staff through the change process. Reshaping the higher education classroom and campus to more effectively serve under-resourced college students often requires substantial discussion, planning, and change management.

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