

Bridging The Talent Gap Case Study: Greenville Chamber (Greenville, South Carolina)



The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) was founded to help organizations succeed by providing expertise, resources, and solutions that effectively support adult learners as they navigate on- and off-ramps between education and employment. We partner with entities across the adult learner ecosystem to help create actionable career pathways along the journey of lifelong learning and meaningful work. CAEL engages with educators, employers, and community leaders to align learning and work so that adults achieve continuous, long-term career success. © 2024 The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). All rights reserved.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Greenville Chamber, in Greenville, South Carolina, conducted the Bridging The Talent Survey (BTTG) campaigns to better understand the skills gap between the educational attainment of their workforce, the needs of local businesses, and to engage incumbent workers in education and upskilling opportunities.

Key Findings

- Employers need workers with a variety of educational backgrounds, including high school diplomas, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and technical certifications.
- Many businesses are interested in partnering with educational institutions to improve employee education and training opportunities, but few partnerships exist.
- There is a significant gap between the availability of educational benefits and employee awareness and utilization of these programs.
- Many employees have a desire for further education but lack guidance and support in navigating the process.

Greenville Chamber's Actions

- Conducted an employer survey to assess talent gaps and employer needs.
- Conducted an employee survey with selected businesses to assess their incumbent workers' education and career goals.
- Implemented the BTTG program to develop and implement strategies to close the skills gap.
- Launched the [TalentRiseGVL](#) program to assist adults in pursuing educational opportunities and career advancement.

Recommendations for Other Communities

- Invest in understanding your community's specific talent gaps.
- Partner with businesses and educational institutions to develop solutions.
- Focus on improving employee awareness and utilization of educational benefits.
- Provide guidance and support to help employees navigate educational pathways.

Overall, the Greenville Chamber's Bridging The Talent Gap initiative demonstrates the importance of collaboration between businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations in addressing workforce development challenges.

I. PROJECT BACKGROUND

How the Project Started

When [Greenville Chamber](#) President and CEO [Carlos Phillips](#) attended his first Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) Major Metro Chambers event in Indianapolis, he was inspired by the [Lumina Foundation's](#) ambitious goal for adult education attainment. Lumina wants to ensure that “by 2025, a system exists that is easy to navigate and has helped 60 percent of Americans earn credentials that prepare them for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.”¹

Mr. Phillips's first thought was, “We need to work on this.” So when he got back to Greenville, he engaged a few of his staff in conversation about Greenville's educational attainment work. These conversations were taking place as the Greenville Chamber was updating its strategic initiatives for their private sector-fueled economic development initiative, [Accelerate](#), and as they were preparing to launch [Accelerate 3.0](#). As a result, the first of Accelerate 3.0's four pillars is to increase educational attainment for working adults ages 25-64, something Mr. Phillips considers foundational to the success of the other three pillars.

During this time, [Dr. Cheryl Garrison](#), executive director of Greenville Chamber Foundation and director of talent and leadership, identified Bridging The Talent Gap (BTTG) as an important mechanism to help them move their educational attainment work forward. BTTG is CAEL's proven approach to activate employers in support of workers' education and career aspirations and goals in the collective movement toward full education and economic equity. You can read more about BTTG [here](#).

Project Needs and Goals

The Greenville Chamber's educational attainment goal is to ensure that 60 percent of 25- to 64-year-olds have a high-quality postsecondary credential, certification, or degree by 2030 that results in meaningful work and economic mobility. Greenville currently sits at 46 percent of working-age adults with an associate degree or higher.² Greenville defines a high-quality credential or certification as one that allows someone to make 15 percent more than they would with only a high school diploma.

The Greenville Chamber wanted to understand what their employers needed in order to help reach this goal. That's where BTTG fits in. “We felt like [the employer survey] was that first step in understanding our business community to be able to help guide the work,” said Dr. Garrison. The goals of the survey were to help the Chamber understand the skills gap Greenville businesses and workers are facing, and to identify industry-driven and data-informed solutions to help close those gaps.

¹ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/our-work/stronger-nation/>

² [A Stronger Nation, Progress for States, South Carolina, Greenville County](#)

II. EMPLOYER SURVEY PROCESS

Survey Dissemination

The Greenville Chamber set a goal of receiving 300 responses to their employer survey and identified a survey radius of 30 miles around Greenville, focusing on the core of their labor market and business service area. (While they are not a regional chamber, they wanted to understand the wider area.) The survey launched in July 2021 and ran through the first half of September 2021 yielding actionable information from 207 employers most of which are small and mid-sized companies.³ You can read more about the characteristics of the survey respondents, including their industry sector, [here](#).

A key resource that the Chamber utilized to achieve this success was the BTTG website provided by CAEL. The Chamber's marketing department customized and branded templated resources for the website that continues to serve as the communication hub for their BTTG initiative. Other resources included key value proposition statements to a variety of audiences and a communications toolkit. You can review Greenville's BTTG website [here](#).

Another valuable resource was a video message from Chamber President and CEO Carlos Phillips encouraging participation in the BTTG survey. In his message, Mr. Phillips emphasized that by taking the survey, respondents would be informing future strategies for the region to increase economic mobility, equity and prosperity for individuals and create talent solutions for employers. He also promoted an incentive – the first 100 survey respondents were entered into a drawing for tickets to a Carolina Panthers game. The video message is available on the website [here](#).

One of the first things the Greenville Chamber did to launch the employer survey was share it with their board of directors, strategic cabinet members, and Accelerate shareholders and ask them to fill it out and share it with others.

They also shared the survey with key partners and asked them to send it to their memberships. These partners included the [Greenville Area Development Corporation](#), the [Greenville Chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management](#), [Employers Network](#), [Greenville Technical College](#), [Skilled Trades Alliance](#), [Visit Greenville](#), [Leadership Greenville](#), and neighboring chambers of commerce and economic developers.

The Greenville Chamber also sent the survey to their own member institutions, first to current investors with 50 or more employees, and then to former investors with 50 or more employees.

In order to reach non-member employers, the Chamber mailed postcards with information about the survey to about 1,500 employers with 50 or more employees in a 30-mile radius. Greenville Business magazine included the postcard in their magazine, which has a circulation of 5,000; the chamber only had to pay the costs associated with printing the postcards.

³ 40% of respondents are small businesses; 42% are mid-sized businesses; and 18% are large businesses.

After reaching out to non-member institutions, the Greenville Chamber reached back out to their own investors, this time those with 30 or more employees.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Dr. Garrison knows that “you can’t just send out a survey one time and expect it to be done.” Here are the steps she took to actively encourage individuals, businesses, and organizations to complete and share the survey:

- Created and distributed an email template people could use to share the survey with their networks.
- Followed up with key individuals she hoped would complete and share the survey.
- Talked about the survey as she met with different groups.
- Encouraged friendly competition among board members to share the survey with others.
- Included information about the survey in weekly email blasts to Chamber investors.
- Entered the first 100 survey respondents into a drawing for tickets to a Carolina Panthers game.
- Contacted people who only partially completed the survey and encouraged them to finish it. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of survey respondents who started but originally did not complete the survey re-engaged with the process and completed the survey once contacted by Dr. Garrison. (Nationally, the percentage of “second-chance” completers is only 62%.)
- Added information about the total number of survey questions to the beginning of the survey after she noticed that some people had abandoned the survey with only a question or two left to complete.

Dr. Garrison believes that the success of Greenville’s employer survey campaign stems from three key factors:

1. Mr. Phillips’s support, and his ability to get everyone at the Greenville Chamber behind this effort, from the marketing department to the various Boards and businesses leadership.
2. The support of the BTTG team at CAEL.
3. Her ability to make this the primary focus of her work for the duration of the six-week survey campaign, plus time leading up to the campaign and after.

III. Employer Survey Conclusion

Key Findings

According to Dr. Garrison, the employer survey yielded “powerful data” that provide a foundation for their work with education entities, employers, and community members/employees. Here are the top three findings:

- I. A clear desire on the part of companies to partner with education providers: Only 12% of Greenville businesses currently partner with learning organizations to address talent issues, but 85% are interested in forming partnerships.⁴
- II. A need for talent across each educational level: More than 50% of employers anticipate the need for more postsecondary certificate holders and technical college degree holders; and nearly 50% of employers anticipate needing more bachelor degree holders.⁵
- III. A strong interest on the part of companies to begin offering education assistance or reexamine the education benefits they currently offer: Fifty-five (55) companies expressed interest in surveying their workers to understand how to better support their workers' education aspirations; and 14 employers who currently do not offer education benefits expressed interest in starting programs.

You can review Greenville’s BTTG employer survey results [here](#), and you can learn more about Greenville’s BTTG campaign [here](#).

Action Planning

An additional tool, the BTTG Action Indices, provides the Greenville Chamber with possible scenarios for moving the needle at scale on their local education attainment goals.

The *College Tuition Support Index* shows the average percent of a community’s employers who provide financial assistance for college tuition for their employees. Greenville is currently at 44%, and the BTTG national average is 54%. Fourteen additional employers offering tuition assistance would move Greenville’s rate from 44% to 51%. Based on Greenville participants’ average financial support and use of benefits, 14 additional employers offering tuition assistance would provide an additional \$700,000 – \$2,160,000 in tuition support in the Greenville community.

The *Education Partnering Index* shows the percent of a community’s employer respondents who currently have partnerships with local colleges or other learning providers to support education, learning, or training for their employees. Greenville is currently at 12%, and the BTTG national average is 13%. Twenty-eight employers expressed high-level interest in partnering with higher education institutions, and 28 additional employers partnering with colleges would move Greenville’s rate well above the BTTG national average to 26%. An additional opportunity for partnerships exists in converting tuition reimbursement offerings to tuition deferral. Seventy-eight employer participants currently offer tuition reimbursement rather than tuition deferral. Community college costs alone are 22% of the average wages for 25 – 34-year-olds with a high school diploma.

⁴ [Greenville Bridging The Talent Gap Employer Survey](#)

⁵ [Greenville Bridging The Talent Gap Employer Survey](#)

Partnerships using tuition deferral rather than reimbursement significantly increase education access and affordability. Creating tuition deferral partnerships for 28 employers offers an affordable opportunity for 6,800 – 11,300 additional Greenville workers to complete their postsecondary education.

The *Education Benefit Use Index* shows the average percent of education benefits used by employees in each community as indicated by employer respondents. Greenville is currently at 36%, and the BTTG national average is 54%. Average employee use of education benefits in Greenville for tuition reimbursement is 34%. The figure for employers offering tuition deferral (meaning that employees don't have to front the cost and wait to be reimbursed by their employer) is 42%, a significant increase. Based on the employee use rate for education programs offering tuition deferral, converting reimbursement programs to deferral programs could generate an additional \$5.3M - \$11.7M in education investment for Greenville, potentially impacting 24,200 to 412,300 employees.

Advice to Other Bridging The Talent Gap Communities

Dr. Garrison is adamant that “the work it takes to do this is worth it, but it shouldn't be underestimated what it takes to do it well. You'll get out of it what you put into it. It requires grit and determination.” She believes understanding your “why” going into the campaign – how this fits into the larger picture – makes it a lot easier to put in the work required.

She's quick to add that the help and support of the BTTG team can't be overstated. “They were always there and supportive. They were part of this team.”

IV. BRIDGING THE TALENT GAP EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

Upon completion of the Bridging The Talent Gap Employer Survey Campaign, Greenville Chamber identified **three (3) employers** who surveyed their workers about their education and upskilling needs and aspirations for workplace advancement using the Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey. Key takeaways from these surveys include:

- **All three organizations have a significant representation of BIPOC and entry-level employees in their workforce.** This highlights a focus on promoting educational opportunities for diverse populations and those new to the workforce.
- In all three cases, a key finding was the gap between employee awareness of existing educational benefits and their full utilization. This indicates a need for improved communication and outreach.
- All three organizations saw positive results through the intermediary services of the Chamber facilitated by the survey. Employees were connected with resources and educational benefits programs.
- **The recommendations in all three cases focused on creating a more supportive learning environment.** This included designating in-house education liaisons, exploring on-site learning opportunities, and collaborating with the Chamber on community-based education navigation services.

Employer 1: A Pharmaceutical Company Invests in Its Workforce

A Greenville-based pharmaceutical manufacturer partnered with the Greenville Chamber to utilize the Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey. The survey, conducted from May 16th to June 2nd, 2022, provided valuable insights into employee education needs and desires.

Over 160 employees participated, with a significant representation from both entry-level positions (36%) and BIPOC communities (43%). The survey revealed a critical disconnect between the company's education benefits program and employee awareness. While 56% of respondents had heard of the program, they lacked details, and nearly half (48%) were unaware of any financial support offered.

However, the survey also highlighted a strong employee desire for further education. A resounding 65% expressed plans to pursue education beyond high school, with a focus on certificates and technical credentials (37%). This ambition extended beyond financial aid. Employees craved a more supportive learning environment. Compared to national benchmarks, they showed a 36% greater interest in education-friendly workplace policies and career growth opportunities.

The survey's impact was immediate. Through the Chamber's intermediary services, 57 employees connected with resources to discuss their educational goals. Another 67 were directed to their employer to learn more about available benefits. The Chamber leveraged these findings to recommend a multi-pronged approach:

- **Workplace Flexibility:** Implementing policies and practices that prioritize employee education, as identified by the survey.
- **Education Liaison:** Designating an in-house point person to collaborate with the Chamber on identifying community resources, fostering partnerships with local colleges, and creating a dynamic learning ecosystem.
- **On-site Learning:** Exploring the feasibility of offering educational opportunities directly within the workplace.
- **Community Collaboration:** Supporting the Chamber's initiative to develop a community education navigator – a centralized resource to assist businesses in promoting employee education opportunities.

By addressing the knowledge gap and fostering a culture of learning, this pharmaceutical company is investing in its workforce's future, creating a win-win situation for both employees and the company's continued success.

Employer 2: A Nonprofit Retailer Empowers Its Workforce

A national nonprofit retailer, partnering with the Greenville Chamber, utilized the Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey between February 28th and May 17th, 2022. The survey, with a strong response rate of 153 participants, included a significant representation from both entry-level positions (42%) and BIPOC communities (53%).

The survey unearthed a clear desire for educational advancement among employees. Forty-two percent (42%) of respondents expressed plans for further education, but a crucial barrier emerged – the need for guidance. Thirty (30) out of the 42 aspiring students specifically sought help navigating the intricacies of the college application process.

Furthermore, the survey indicated a preference for on-site educational opportunities. Compared to national trends, employees were 42% more likely to express interest in having higher education professionals visit their workplace to discuss educational options.

This valuable feedback spurred immediate action. The Chamber's intermediary services successfully connected 30 employees with resources to address their educational goals. Additionally, 28 employees were directed to their employer to explore existing education benefits programs.

Looking ahead, the Chamber is collaborating with the nonprofit retailer to establish a robust community-based education navigation service. This initiative will provide employees with the necessary support to navigate the path towards educational attainment. By addressing these needs, the nonprofit retailer empowers its workforce, fostering a culture of continuous learning and ultimately strengthening both the organization and the community it serves.

Employer 3: Rehabilitation Center Invests in Employee Learning

A Greenville-based Rehabilitation Healthcare Campus partnered with the Greenville Chamber to leverage the Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey. Conducted between April 22nd and May 12th, 2022, the survey received responses from 60 employees, with a strong representation from both entry-level positions (47%) and BIPOC communities (45%).

The survey revealed a unique set of priorities compared to national benchmarks. Employees at the Rehabilitation Center placed a greater emphasis on factors like flexible scheduling, access to educational resources, and course availability, indicating a desire to pursue education while managing their work schedules.

Through the Chamber's intermediary services, nine (9) employees connected with resources to discuss their educational goals, and another nine (9) were directed to their employer to explore existing education benefits.

Building on this momentum, the Chamber is collaborating with the Rehabilitation Center to develop a multi-faceted approach:

- **Education Liaison:** Appointing a dedicated staff member to work with the Chamber on identifying community resources. This liaison will explore partnerships with local colleges to leverage existing programs like tuition-free options, application fee waivers, or scholarship opportunities.
- **Streamlined Benefits:** Shifting from a reimbursement-based policy to a direct payment system with colleges. This simplifies the process and makes educational benefits more readily accessible for employees.
- **Navigator Services:** Supporting the Chamber's initiative to create a community education navigator – a centralized resource to assist businesses in promoting employee education opportunities.
- **On-site Learning:** Exploring the possibility of offering college courses directly at the Rehabilitation Center, further reducing barriers to employee education.

By addressing these specific needs and fostering a supportive learning environment, the Rehabilitation Center is investing in its workforce's growth. This commitment empowers employees, enhances the quality of care provided, and strengthens the Center's position within the community.

V. STANDING UP NAVIGATOR SERVICES

Program Launch

As a result of Greenville Chamber's Bridging The Talent Gap work, they built a case for and launched their education navigator program, [TalentRiseGVL](#), in 2023. TalentRiseGVL serves and assists adults in navigating barriers to education and career transitions by helping them understand their postsecondary options and developing a plan to obtain a certification, credential or degree.

TalentRiseGVL is an example of [TGN@CAEL's](#) navigator framework. Navigators are community-based practitioners who work with adults to help them bust barriers to enrollment and coach them to persevere on their education journey. CAEL assists organizations in developing local navigator programs, training navigators, designing data collection systems, and providing impact reporting. Through [TGN@CAEL Membership](#), CAEL also supports a community of practice for navigators, access to navigator specific resources, and professional development activities.

CAEL's research shows that adults who access the services of a navigator are four times (4X) more likely to enroll in postsecondary education and are also more likely to complete their education goals. Importantly, navigator services are proven to facilitate reenrollment for individuals who identify as BIPOC and who are low-income. In fact, 76% of individuals who have been served by a TGN@CAEL trained navigator identify as BIPOC and make less than \$42,000 annually.⁶

To date (July 2024), TalentRiseGVL, has served 125 individuals with impressive results:

- 9 have completed a certification.
- 22 are currently enrolled in postsecondary education.
- 53 are pre-enrolled (working with the navigator to weigh options, complete applications, etc.).
- 22 have been referred to wrap-around services (e.g. additional social services, child care support, financial assistance, etc.).
- Of note, 76% of program participants are from minority populations and 75% are under Greenville County's median income level.

Taking Action in Your Community

If you'd like more information about CAEL's [Bridging The Talent Gap](#) solution or how to stand up navigator services in your community, please contact Bridgett Strickler, vice president, strategic partnerships, bstrickler@cael.org. If you are interested in a TGN@CAEL Membership, please contact Jeannie McCarron, vice president, membership engagement, jmccarron@cael.org.

⁶ <https://www.cael.org/dtmu>, *Who are Comebackers?*