

# BRIDGING TO A BETTER FUTURE FINDINGS

## *Executive Summary*



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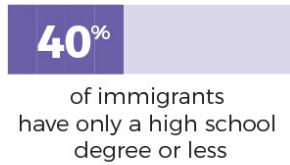
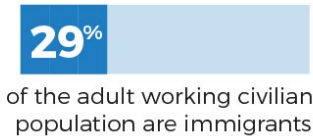
*Immigrants have long contributed to the cultural and economic life of communities across the United States. Today, they represent an often-untapped pool of workers that hold the potential to fill significant labor market needs. Finding ways to support the development of immigrants' English language skills and their acquisition of U.S.-recognized credentials is important for individuals, families, and the economy.*

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Since 2011, the Richard and Susan Smith Family Foundation (SFF) has invested \$3.5 million in bridge-to-college programs aimed at helping immigrant English language learners make successful transitions to postsecondary education and training and employment. The Foundation engaged Jobs for the Future (JFF) to conduct an evaluation to explore the operation and outcomes of the programs, provide a deeper understanding of the results of the Foundation's investment, and inform future bridge program design. The evaluation included a review of the SFF-funded program structures and offerings, an analysis of available data on student characteristics and outcomes, and a survey of past bridge program participants, which included 69 one-hour phone interviews. The results of the evaluation offer insights into the multiple ways that bridge-to-college services can help immigrants make progress in their education and work lives, and findings suggest ways that philanthropy can play a valuable role in supporting these efforts.



## IMMIGRANT ADULTS IN BOSTON



Source: Osterman, Paul, William Kimball, and Christine Riordan. 2017. Boston's Immigrants: An Essential Component of a Strong Economy, Boston, MA: JVS.

## HELPING IMMIGRANTS SUCCEED Smith Family Foundation Bridge-to-College Programs Provide:

**EL** English skill development

Preparation for college

Cultural insights

Soft skill development

Community

**AMONG 800 PARTICIPANTS:**  
(served between 2009 and 2016)

**63%** ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

**78%**

completed **2** or **more** semesters, with an average completing **4.9** semesters

### A CLOSER LOOK: from a survey of 161 participants

Of those **enrolled** in college  
**35%** completed a **certificate** or **degree**

Among those who went to **occupational training** instead of college:

**64%** found work **directly related** to their training

Graduates reported an **increase** in **median hourly wages** of

**82%** (from **\$8.75** to **\$16.00**)

**79%**

of graduates said they were **"better off"** financially today than when they started their bridge program

Of those who **graduated** with a **certificate** or **degree**:

**84%** got a job **related** to their **degree**



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## Programs and Participants

SFF funds four bridge-to-college (“bridge”) programs in and around Boston:

- *Next STEP Transitional English Program* at the Asian American Civic Association (AACA)
- *Bridges to College and Careers* at Jewish Vocational Service (JVS)
- *ESOL Career Pathways Bridge* at Northern Essex Community College (NECC)
- *Transitions to College and Careers* at the YMCA of Greater Boston International Learning Center

The programs serve immigrant adults who range in age from 18 to 75 and hail from many countries. A substantial portion of participants had obtained college-level education and degrees prior to immigrating to the United States. The evaluation revealed that demand for bridge services is high, but many potential students lack the requisite skills and/or life situations to support bridge program success.

Although the four programs differ somewhat in length and intensity of instruction, all offer comprehensive services to support the linguistic, academic, and cultural preparation of adult immigrants to foster their success in college and work settings. All programs include academic skill development, the development of “college knowledge,” career preparation, and advising to support college transitions. All of the programs take steps to address the linguistic and cultural needs of English language learners, and all have developed relationships with colleges to support students’ transitions.

## Outcomes

The SFF-funded programs have led to multiple positive outcomes related to education, economic advancement, and cultural integration into the United States. National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data and student data provided by programs showed that 63% (527) of bridge participants enrolled in college, a rate that is comparable to that found among other studies of adult transitions to college.<sup>1</sup> For those who enrolled, the majority are still working toward a degree, and many are continuing on to pursue additional degrees.

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<sup>1</sup> An evaluation of the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project found that among program graduates, 69% were enrolled or expected to enroll in college. Gittleman, Julia. 2005. *The New England ABE-to-College Transition Project Evaluation Report*. Quincy, MA: The Nellie Mae Foundation.

Participant survey responses shed light on the benefits of acquiring college credentials. The overwhelming majority (84%) of the 105 respondents who graduated obtained a job related to their degree. Among respondents who did not enroll in college, 50% (31) went on to attend a training program. Of these, 64% found work directly related to their training. Respondents who completed a college credential or training program—and were working pre- and post-bridge—reported an increase in median hourly wages of 82% (\$8.75 to \$16.00). In describing their financial situation, 79% of respondents who graduated from a certificate or degree program, and 55% of those who participated in training, indicated that they were “better off” today compared to when they started the bridge. The survey findings thus show the multiple ways that bridge programs facilitate the economic advancement of adult immigrant learners.

## Participant Perspectives

In their survey responses, participants indicated a high level of satisfaction with their programs. Respondents described how bridge programs assisted them with language and academic skill development, preparation for college, insights into American culture and life in the United States, developing their confidence in pursuing college and employment, and providing a supportive community in and out of the classroom. Student stories reflect how programs allowed skilled, experienced immigrants to establish career directions, return to work in their fields, or advance from low-wage work into middle-skill jobs.

Survey responses reveal the challenges to pursuing postsecondary education faced by bridge participants. Respondents noted factors commonly experienced by adults going to college, including most prominently the financial burden of college and the difficulty of managing work and study simultaneously. Participant responses made clear how bridge programs can play an important role in mitigating the challenges of applying to college by helping students become aware of steps in the process and preparing them for elements like form completion, testing, and essay writing.

Respondents also pointed out the importance of support at college from instructors and supportive services, as well as their own individual motivation, in helping them persist in college. Students recommended that colleges make a greater effort to accommodate their status as

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The Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study (ATLAS), which built on the Gittleman evaluation, followed 227 adult students who entered ABE-to-College programs in fall 2007 or spring 2008. Out of 220 adult students for whom the study had data, 37% never enrolled, 32% enrolled but dropped out, and 31% enrolled and were still enrolled or finished at the end of the study. Smith, Cristine and Laura Gluck. 2016. *Adult Transitions Longitudinal Study. Final Report to the Nellie Mae Foundation*. Amherst, MA: The Center for International Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Although these studies included both ESOL and non-ESOL learners, they provide useful benchmarks for the performance of the SFF-funded bridge programs.

nontraditional students balancing multiple adult roles and as immigrants making their way through new environments and systems.

### **The Smith Investment**

The SFF-funded bridge programs are filling a significant gap in services specifically targeted at higher-level, adult English language learners. Few other highly structured bridge programs operate in the Boston area, and those that exist do not adequately address the specific needs of adult English language learners. The four programs we studied have used Smith Foundation resources to expand and enhance program capacity, strengthen follow-up services, and develop innovative partnerships with colleges and other levels of ESOL services.

Amid the other public and private sources available to support English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) bridge services, the contribution of the Smith Foundation has been critical in allowing programs to offer high-quality services. SFF's investment demonstrates the potential contribution of philanthropy to meet the needs of an important population within our labor market and communities. Below are ways that funders can get involved in supporting programs like the SFF-funded programs in Boston.

## **SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER INVESTMENT**

There is considerable need for bridge programming for immigrant adults and significant scope for philanthropy to make investments in this area. As SFF and other funders look toward possible directions for future funding, we recommend the following options that have the potential to significantly expand access to bridge programs for immigrants.

1. **Invest in on-ramps to bridge programs.** Demand for bridge programs outpaces supply, and many people are being turned away from the few that exist because they are not academically prepared. Pre-bridge programs serve as on-ramps by raising candidates' skill levels to those needed for entry and success in bridge programs.
2. **Build public-private partnerships to support bridge programming.** Demand for bridge programs that specifically target English language learners exceeds supply. Private investments and partnerships complement public investments in this area and create opportunities to serve many more skilled and motivated immigrants.
3. **Support innovative educational models, particularly for highly skilled immigrants.** New educational models can accelerate the progress of highly educated immigrants in reaching their career goals. These models might include dedicated centers that support entry into specific industries, competency-based approaches that accelerate credential

attainment, models that combine online and face-to-face learning, and models that integrate English instruction with occupational training.

4. **Fund research that focuses specifically on the experiences and needs of adult immigrant learners.** Research literature to date typically combines US-born and foreign-born students, but the needs of these groups are quite different. More research is needed to better understand how best to contribute to the success of English language learners in and beyond bridge-to-college programs.
5. **Establish scholarship funds to support immigrant students.** The challenge of financing higher education was a persistent theme in participant survey responses. Funders might consider establishing and managing a fund to provide scholarships and/or matched savings of even relatively small amounts (\$2,000–\$4,000) to enable highly motivated students to pursue their studies, graduate more quickly, and advance economically.
6. **Invest in expanded support services in college.** Once in college, immigrant students still benefit from supportive services that help them navigate the demands of college and manage their multiple roles, but resources to support intensive models of student support are often limited. Philanthropic investments could help to fill that gap through partnerships with community colleges.