

Bridges to Brighter Futures

Lessons and Findings from Middle-Skills Pathways Grantee Convenings

April 2022

Background on Middle-Skills Pathways in Chicago

In partnership with the Bridges to Brighter Futures initiative, Education Systems Center at Northern Illinois University (EdSystems) launched the [Middle-Skills Pathways in Chicago project](#) to support the advancement and accessibility of career pathways in Chicago that lead to industry credential and degrees associated with priority occupations that pay a living wage. To determine how education and workforce partners can advance middle-skills pathways in Chicago, EdSystems has been conducting a deep landscape analysis of existing pathways generally and in the specific sectors of Education/Childcare, Health Sciences, Information Technology, Manufacturing, and Transportation-Distribution-Logistics. The work culminated with the publication of [Overall Systems Recommendations](#), [Outcomes Framework](#), and [Industry Sector Analyses](#).

Our focus is now on additional sector analyses, as well as supporting the operationalizing of our recommendations with organizations involved in middle-skills pathways implementation. Our goal is to inform those involved with system design and implementation, identify policy barriers to effective program progressions for populations of focus, and inform the funding community of gaps and strategic investment opportunities. Towards that aim, EdSystems advised Bridges to Brighter Futures on its Request for Proposals for grantees implementing middle-skills pathways and had an opportunity to convene a series of 3 sessions with these grantees to learn more about their models, promote peer-to-peer collaboration, and identify strategies for strengthening middle-skills pathway models involving private training providers that support young people to progress along a career pathway.

Background on Middle Skills Grantees and Summary of Communities of Practice Sessions

To prepare for the grantee Community of Practice (COP) sessions, EdSystems interviewed each grant recipient to obtain a deeper understanding of its program mission and alignment to the

Middle-Skills Pathways in Chicago framework and recommendations. The project grantees include the following organizations and sector focuses:

1. Hire360 - *Construction*
2. JARC (Jane Addams Resource Corporation) - *Manufacturing*
3. Revolution Workshop - *Construction*
4. OAI, Inc - *Health Science*
5. i.c stars - *Information Technology*
6. National Able Network - *Information Technology*
7. Per Scholas - *Information Technology*

Between December 2021 and February 2022, we hosted 3 Community of Practice Sessions with representation from all grantee organizations. Individual participation included staff that could be considered a Grant Program Lead, Executive Director or Chief of Programs, Case Manager or Program coordinator/associate role. In the first gathering, the emphasis was on presenting EdSystems' frameworks for Middle Skills pathways to the grantees and getting substantive feedback and reaction, in particular on the industry sector analyses.

The second COP centered on presentations by two organizations working with similar adult populations and their insights on prolonged engagement with postsecondary students and adults seeking to re-enroll in college. Those organizations, LiFT Chicago and One Million Degrees, hosted breakout presentations during the convenings and grantees had an opportunity to debrief on what they had learned. A summary of the breakouts is provided below:

- LiFT Chicago. Human services during the pandemic. Barrier reduction and wraparound supports, and particular challenges and strategies relating to remote/hybrid training and socio-emotional challenges.
- One Million Degrees. Sustaining Participant Engagement and Support. How to increase supports that lead to increased postsecondary enrollment and persistence and implications for training programs

Lastly, in COP 3, Grantees had an opportunity to hear a presentation from City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), particularly about their efforts to accelerate Adult learners through college and revamp Prior-Learning Assessment processes in the college system. Grantees had an opportunity to debrief CCC's presentation and then proceeded to a series of breakout sessions focused survey questions regarding their use of data and engagement with alumni from their programs.

Grantee Survey Protocol and Analysis

During the third grantee convening, two major themes surfaced: the need for better understanding of how organizations engage with actionable participant data, and the need for better understanding of the ongoing support program participants needed as program alumni. As a result, EdSystems created two survey protocols, one around data practices and one around alumni engagement. These surveys sought to address the central questions below:

- What data practices are necessary to better support Middle-Skills programs?

- What do Middle-Skills students need (education/training, alumni support, etc.) to be able to access good jobs and move up the career ladder?
- What do Bridges grantees need (beyond increased funding) to improve long term student success? To collect more actionable data?

For background, the “Survey Protocol” described above refers to an allocated portion of the agenda items addressed in the COP’s third convening. Grantee organizations were presented with a survey link within small group breakouts and given time and opportunity to fill out the survey in real time. In addition, they also had the opportunity to discuss various aspects of their response or ask questions about parts of the survey with the EdSystems staffer facilitating their breakout session.

The first survey was called “Where are you in your data journey” and consisted of 4 open -ended questions and 2 multiple-choice grids on a progressive scale. This survey protocol was conducted on the back end of a presentation by EdSystems staff around good organizational data practices and processes. There were 14 responses from grantee organization staff, representing 6 of the 7 organizations.

In the multiple choice grids, COP participants were given a chance to rate their organizational data practices on the following progressive scale:

1. Have Yet to Begin to Implement
2. Started Implementation
3. Progressing Well
4. Organizational Strength

The multiple choice grid questions and results were as follows:

Survey Grid Question	Average Score	Mode Score
Team Structures: We have an established data team	3.00	4
Tools: Our teams have access to and know how to use data analysis tools.	2.92	3
Action Planning: We identify data-driven goals and develop and implement action plans to accomplish those goals.	3.15	4
Leadership Structures: There is a “data leader” identified within the team.	3.00	3
Question Formulation: We know how to formulate questions about key issues pertaining to participant pathway progression	3.23	3
Time: There are regularly scheduled times for us to engage in collaborative data analysis and interpretation.	3.08	4

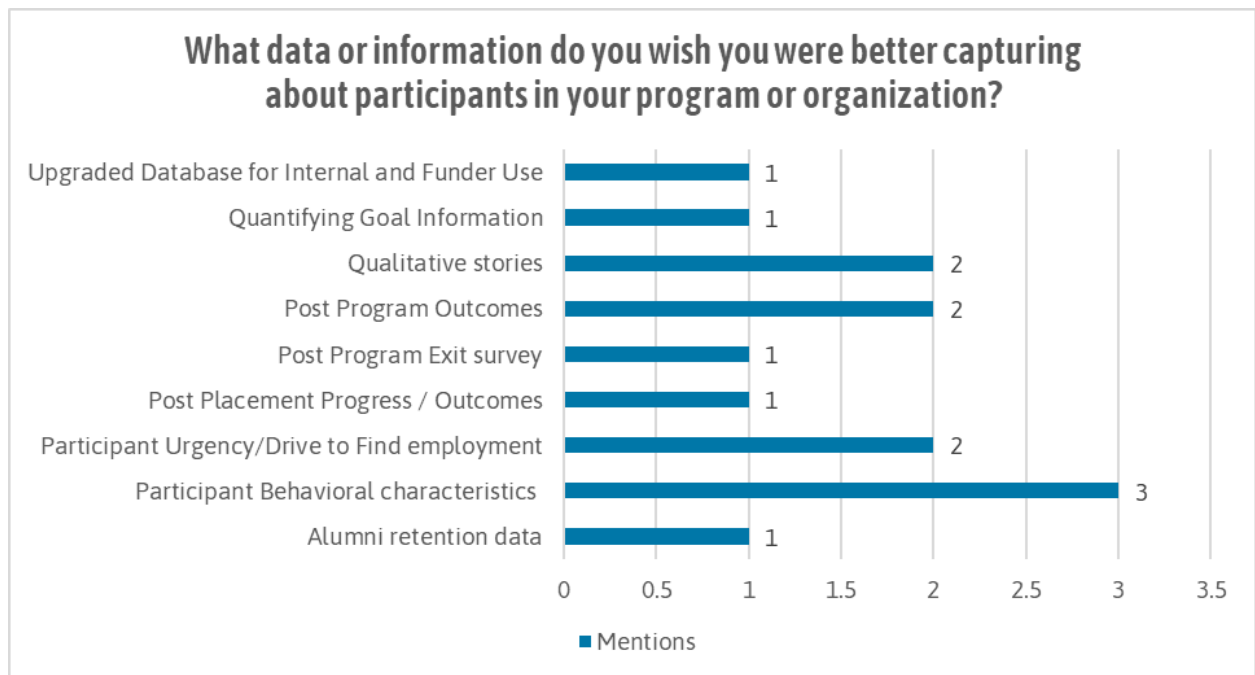
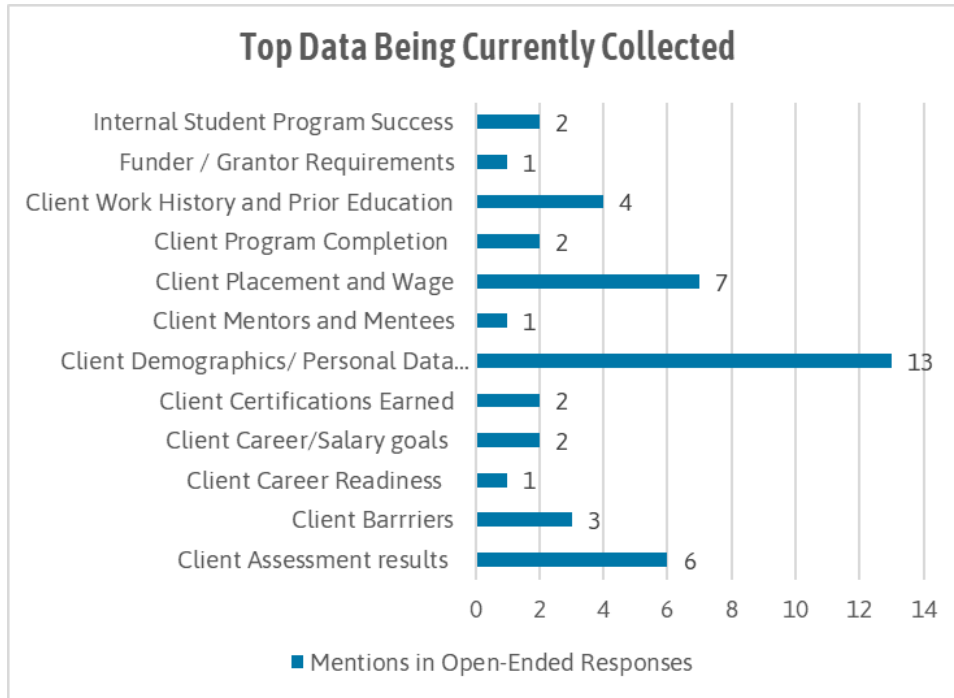
Data Literacy: Our team is comfortable using key data terms and concepts.	3.08	4
Commitment: There is a commitment by team members to make better use of data.	3.15	4
Leadership: Leaders model data-driven decision making as a key part of their roles and responsibilities.	2.85	3
Continual Improvement: Our team is committed to using the inquiry process to make ongoing improvements in practice for participant success.	3.08	3
Accountability: There are clear expectations and people are held accountable for the use of data across team structures.	3.00	3
Beliefs about Data: Team members believe that data can and should be used to inform organizational practices.	3.38	4
Desire to Collaborate: Collaboration amongst members is highly valued across the team.	3.54	4
Beliefs about Practice: Our team is open to changing their practices based on data about participant outcomes.	3.38	4
Median Score	3.08	

When looking at the table, of the 15 grid questions, there are only 5 rows where grantee organizations had an average score entirely below the median for that column (3.08), highlighted in pink. These rows would indicate an area of relative weakness in organizational data practices and could lead to more intense focus in future COP's or professional development for organizational leadership.

Shifting to the open-ended questions, there were two questions that yielded robust responses from the grantees. Those questions are:

- Make a list of the top 3 categories of data you are actually collecting and using in your program/organization. In what ways and for what purposes is this data being collected and used?
- What data or information do you wish you were better captured about participants in your program or organization? How would you use that information? How could it change the trajectory of your practices?

Although these questions allowed open-ended responses, many of the results were subjectively interpreted and recoded by EdSystems around similar themes and topics. The Results are below.



In looking at these two charts above, what stands out is the contrast that grantee organizations are primarily collecting basic demographic and some quantitative data from program participants, but also desire more qualitative data such as participant urgency and behavioral characteristics that indicate their level of commitment to seeking and sustaining a job.

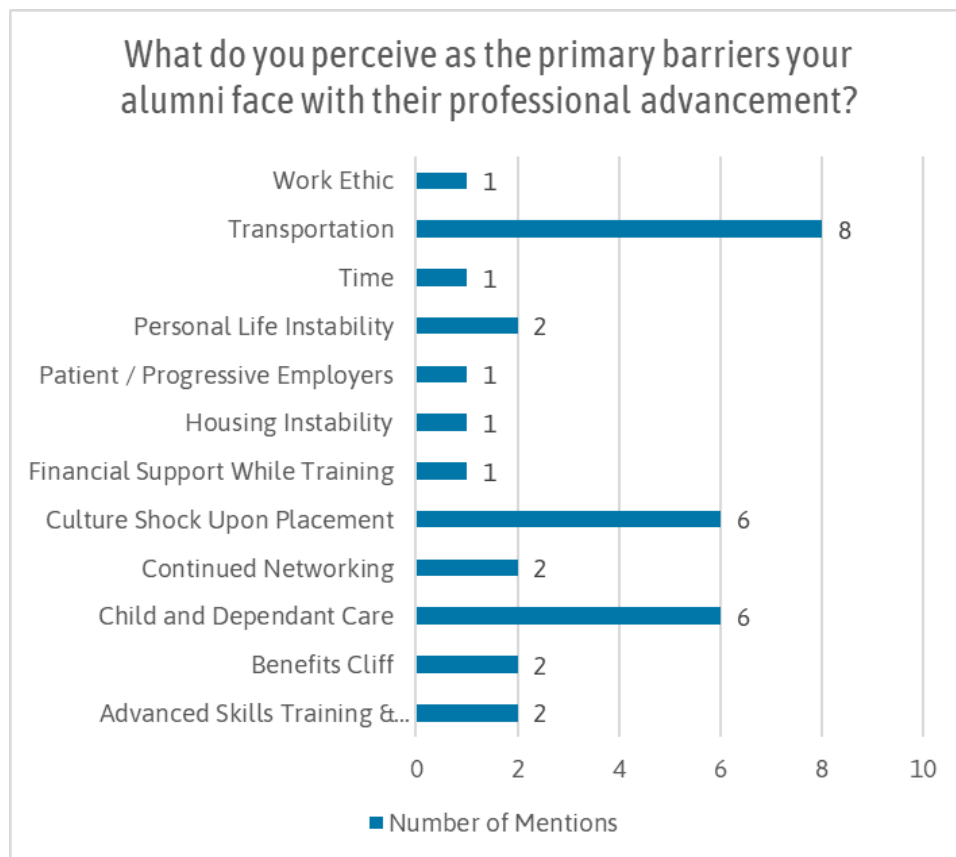
In the second survey, called “Where are you in your alumni engagement journey”, grantee organizations were presented 5 open-ended questions about what and how often they provide support to program participants after their technical training is finished. They were also asked about what barriers are most common among their program participants. This survey had 13 responses and represented 6 of the 7 organizations.

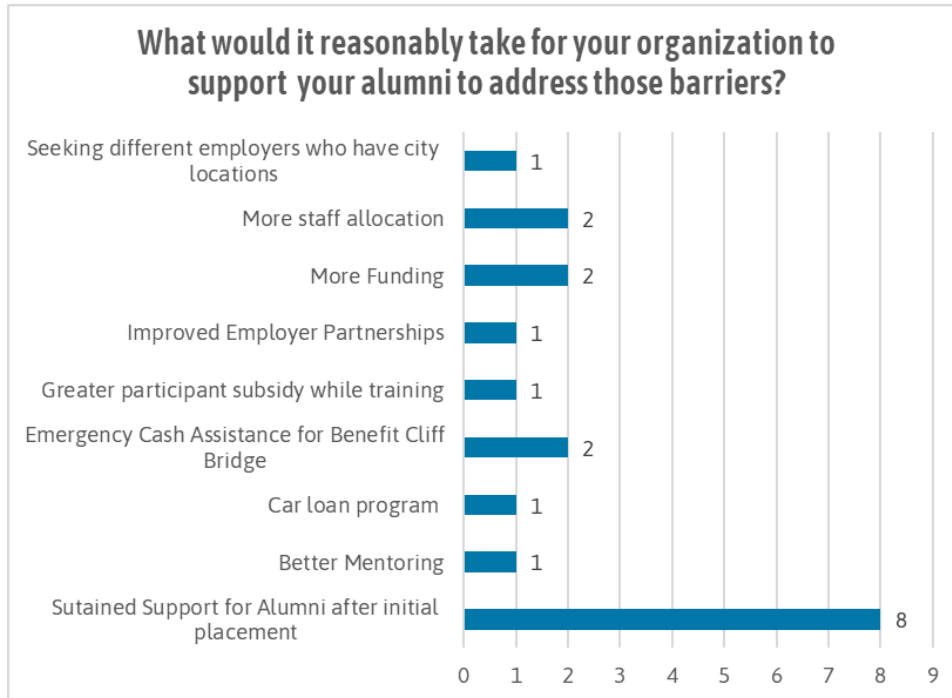
First, EdSystems sought to compare the support given to program participants during and after the completion of their technical training. Although these questions allowed open-ended responses, many of the results were subjectively interpreted and recoded by EdSystems around similar themes and topics. The results of the survey are below:

Type of Support Given to Clients	During Training	After Training
Alumni Services	1	0
Case Management	1	1
Direct Money: Emergency financial support	4	2
Direct Money: Stipends/ Subsidies	4	0
Financial Planning	8	3
Fundraising Support	1	1
Job Placement & Coaching & Networks	9	14
Legal services (including expungement services)	6	1
Mental Health Counseling	2	1
Mentoring	1	1
Programmatic Supportive Services	2	0
Referrals: Basic and Complicated Needs	8	4
Subsidy: Childcare supports	1	0
Subsidy: Housing assistance	1	1
Subsidy: Occupational Supplies	5	1
Subsidy: Transportation assistance	2	3
Training: Soft Skill Training	3	0
Training: Technical Training / Upskilling	2	5
Training: Test Prep	2	0

What stands out in the chart above is that during technical training, grantee organizations provide a more diverse set of wrap-around supports to their program participants, but after the completion of training the alumni engagement primarily revolves around “Job Placement & Coaching & Networks”. The narrowness of their alumni engagement practices stands out when compared to grantee perceptions of the major barriers being faced by their clients.

Next, grantee organizations were asked about the primary barriers their alumni face with their professional advancement and what would it reasonably take for them to support alumni in addressing those barriers. Although these questions allowed open-ended responses, many of the results were subjectively interpreted and recoded by EdSystems around similar themes and topics. The results are below.





In the first chart about barriers, the leading categories are Transportation, Child and Dependent Care, and Culture Shock After Initial Placement. Two of these categories signify financial barriers but the other category, Culture Shock, implies that program participants struggle when first on the job because of work culture, seniority dynamics, and the general daily grind of “showing up” in the workplace.

The solution to overcome a barrier such as “Culture Shock,” is implied in the second chart of grantee organization responses about what it would take for program participants to overcome barriers. The most common category of responses mentioned all had to do with the label “Sustained Support for Alumni after initial placement”. Responses in this category included ongoing case management and referrals and more deliberate relationships with alumni. The need for financial support to program participants after completion of training cannot be ignored, but the type of financial support needed is diverse and wide-ranging.

Next Steps and Future Convenings

To continue phase two of its Middle Skills Pathways analysis, EdSystems will continue a deep landscape analysis of middle skill career pathways in Chicago that lead to industry credentials and degrees associated with “priority occupations”. The focus will be on five new sectors: Finance and Business Services; Architecture, Construction, and Energy (ACE); Arts & Communications; Agriculture Food and Natural Resources (AFNR); Culinary Arts and Hospitality; and Human and Public Services (HPS, non-Education).

Beyond that, the Community of Practice sessions hosted by the Bridges for Brighter Futures Fund revealed a few implications for government agencies and institutions involved in philanthropy of

middle skills pathways. First, Adult learners and pathway participants need prolonged support with complicated wrap-around services and coaching that continues even after they receive technical training. Organizations serving pathway participants struggle to implement this sustained engagement in order to support participants through some of their biggest barriers, either because of lack of resources to do so or lack of processes to do so in an efficient and sustained method.

Secondly organizations that provide pathway training and support have a narrow use of actionable data when it comes to program participants. Many times, organizations are limited to baseline participant descriptive information, such as, demographic and personal data, and some basic quantifiable outcomes. Organizations desire more robust qualitative data to better understand and support pathway participants long term, thus being able to case manage and coach through work site and financial barriers that may arise. Future organizations in pathway implementation would stand to benefit from case study examples and cross collaboration with organizations leading on alumni engagement and evolving data practices.

Convening Notes and Source Material

- [December 2021 Presentation](#)
- [January 2022 Presentation](#)
 - [LiFT Presentation](#)
 - [OMD Presentation](#)
- [February 2022 Presentation](#)
 - [CCC Presentation](#)