

BRIDGING THE TALENT GAP CASE STUDY: GREENVILLE CHAMBER EMPLOYER SURVEY

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) 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](#), Director of Talent and Workforce Solutions at the Greenville Chamber, was also in conversation with Kathy Zandona, Senior Vice President of Network Strategy and Development at The Graduate! Network (TGN). Through these conversations, the Greenville Chamber identified Bridging The Talent Gap (BTTG) as an important mechanism to help them move their educational attainment work forward. BTTG is TGN's proven approach to activate employers in support of their workers' aspirations and goals in the collective movement toward full education and economic equity. You can read more about The Graduate! Network [here](#) and 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

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

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

and workers are facing, and to identify industry-driven and data-informed solutions to help close those gaps.

II. Project 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 The Graduate! Network team. 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](#), their value proposition statements [here](#), and their communications toolkit [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

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

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.

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 eblasts 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. 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 percent 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.
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. Project 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:

1. 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
2. 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
3. A strong interest on the part of companies to begin offering education assistance or reexamine the education benefits they currently offer: Fifty-five 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](#).

FOLLOW-UP

The educational task force within the leadership council of the Accelerate shareholder group has been charged with continuing this work. As of the publication date of this case study (January 2022), they are the only group with whom the Greenville Chamber has shared the survey data. The next group they plan to share the data with are the survey respondents. Dr. Garrison is developing a strategy for who they will share the data with next.

Action Planning

The BTTG Action Indices provide the Greenville Chamber with possible scenarios for moving the needle at scale on their local education attainment goals.

The College Tuition Support Index indicates 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 indicates 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. Partnerships using tuition deferral rather than reimbursement

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

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

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 indicates 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 deferral is 42%, a significant increase. Based on the employee use rate for education programs offering tuition deferral, converting reimbursement programs to deferral 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.”

If you'd like more information about The Graduate! Network's Bridging The Talent Gap initiative, please fill out our interest form [here](#).

The Graduate! Network

WHO WE ARE

The Graduate! Network is a national think and do tank catalyzing movement toward educational equity.

WHAT WE DO

We illuminate solutions to the educational inequities facing economically vulnerable adults and activate pathways for those adults to achieve their educational goals.

HOW WE DO IT

We amplify lived experience through data and storytelling; co-create models for post-secondary completion; and champion policies that contribute to a more just society.

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