Welcome to LearnX 2016

The Graduate! Network hosts one National Director’s Institute each year, designed to be an intensive co-learning experience to help communities advance their work. Defined as a Learning Exchange and dubbed “LearnX”, this two day immersive meeting is an opportunity for leaders of Graduate! Network communities to come together and learn from each other’s experiences, connect with other experts, and hear about new initiatives and developments run by the central organization. Read on to learn more about the collective work of The Graduate! Network.

An Introduction to the Four Pillars

**Impact Services:** Support adults with research-based educational programs, services and academic practices that increase college completion.

**Partnerships:** Strengthen partnerships to influence policies and practices within and between sectors, particularly higher education, employers and communities, in and across regions as well as states.

**Messaging:** Communicate why it matters for adult students to complete their degrees for civic, economic, and personal benefits, and how talent strategies can achieve goals through adult college completion.

**Sustainability:** As a national consortium of support for adult college success, align and invest in research and design of sustainable and scalable business and funding models that can be duplicated across communities.

Bridging the Talent Gap

Bridging the Talent Gap (BTTG) works to create employer-higher education partnerships. BTTG’s first project is to collect data about hiring, educational attainment, and college access in communities. BTTG is now working on interpreting the data and collaborating with employers to solve talent gaps. **Click to read more.**

Our communities are Albuquerque, NM; Charleston, SC; Cleveland, OH; Greensboro, NC; Jacksonville, FL; Kansas City, MO; Louisville, KY; Philadelphia, PA; Providence, RI; San Antonio, TX; Southern Indiana; Spokane, WA; St. Louis, MO; Wichita, KS; Tennessee Reconnect Communities: Memphis, Middle TN, Northeast TN, Northwest TN, Smoky Mountain, South Central TN, Southwest TN and Upper Cumberland.

Thanks to our national funders:
Dear Colleagues,

In October 2016 Graduate! Network leaders met at LearnX2016 in Philadelphia to share ideas, practices, strategies, and stories about our community efforts to increase college completion among adults. Comebacker Gladys Systrunk inspired us with her tenacity. Practitioners and academics, community leaders, strategists and supporters shared ideas and practices. I was awed by the intensity, focus and drive to mobilize resources, the commitment to think openly, strategically and pragmatically and creatively about the present and the future of this work, and to delve into the muddiest of details. All are necessary in order to achieve progress for and with our communities and Comebackers. This digital newspaper is a brief capture of those two days. I hope you enjoy the memories it revives and that it sparks new ideas, even if you were unable to join us.

In my home we end our day by sharing Appreciations. Small or big actions that made us feel better. I want you to know that I enormously appreciate each and everyone of you, our national community of people who expand a collective vision for adult post-secondary attainment, invest time, expertise, effort and connections to improve outcomes for adults and make our work year-round a force for positive and lasting change. I look forward to the next time we meet and to hearing from you soon and often.

Happy Holidays,

Hadass Sheffer, President
The Graduate! Network, Inc.

The Graduate! Network Newspaper will be published quarterly. We’d like to know what you want to see here in the future, so to contribute to this publication please contact Jen at Graduate-Network dot org
Learning from Comebackers: Addressing a Key Demographic in the College Completion Puzzle

Adults do best when they are strongly motivated by personal fulfillment, follow their interests, aim higher, explore tuition assistance resources, and enroll in college courses designed for active learning.

Dr. Matt Bergman, a professor at the University of Louisville’s College of Education, discussed the demographics of Comebackers at U of L and the challenges they face. His research, which will eventually be expanded to other institutions, also proposes a model for predicting completion. First, Matt pointed out that the majority (around 75%) of college students in the USA range in age from 25 to 70+ years old, older than the traditional college 18-22 age range. Comebackers are not a homogenous group in other ways, either: they may have blue or white-collar jobs, work in a skilled labor trade or an office environment. They may have a middle-class income or scrape by on minimum wage or be unemployed. They return for a wide variety of reasons including career advancement, changing careers, or inspiring their children. However, Matt’s research shows that the most commonly cited reason to return was personal fulfillment. While this was not a surprise to those who regularly work with Comebackers, it is a finding that is not widely recognized outside of continuing education departments and is important for our collective and individual work.

Adult learners say they are challenged by balancing competing needs, outside interests and finding time to study. Matt emphasized the need to connect Comebackers to an institution and program that provides academic and other supporting services and cautioned against directing them to institutions that have proven to be unsupportive of adults. [Editor’s Note: The Graduate! Network promotes effectiveness/support guidelines such as CAEL’s ALFI Principles and Thomas Edison State University’s Purpose Statement.] Matt emphasized the need to connect Comebackers to an institution with academic programs that encourage active learning, are relevant to students’ career interests, and meld remediation and content. Institutions should also offer support programs such as learning centers that are welcoming to adults. In Active Learning environments, the instructor creates activities that are designed for the students to think about how they are learning as they are participating in class. Activities are introduced into the classroom rather than left to homework, and lectures are kept to a minimum.

While data on graduation rates at not-for-profit or for-profit institutions is incomplete and varies widely by institution and by program, posted national average graduation rates at not-for-profit institutions are 58% compared to 27% at for-profit institutions. Matt suggested that Graduate! Network advisors ensure that Comebackers are fully aware of statistics about graduation and career outcomes before enrolling in any program.

Matt presented 24 different factors that he tested for ability to predict graduation outcomes, including income, educational goals, family responsibilities, life events, financial aid, and active/relevant learning. All 24 variables were predictive on their own, but only three variables were statistically significant when controlled for the other variables. Specifically:

1. Comebackers who take courses that are designed to complete a two-year degree are more likely to earn a four-year degree, they are more likely to graduate if they ultimately aim for a degree higher than the degree they are currently pursuing. For example, if a Comebacker is working on a two-year degree but eventually wants to earn a four-year degree, they are more likely to complete a two-year degree.

2. While a Comebacker’s financial situation was not statistically predictive of success, an individual’s perception of their ability to pay for college proved to be highly significant. Matt suggested that Graduate! advisors discuss perceptions of college finances and engage Comebackers in exploring a broad range of means of paying for college.

3. Comebackers who take courses that are designed to be engaging and relevant to students’ experiences and goals also graduate at higher rates. To this end, Graduate! advisors should help Comebackers search for a program that is genuinely interesting to them. Higher educational institutions should ensure programs and courses are engaging, promote active learning, and are relevant to Comebackers’ lives.

Finally, Matt mentioned the focus on “life events” which many advisors use to lead conversations with Comebackers. This is often cited as a barrier, but Matt’s research highlights that everyone has life events that potentially distract from goals. He suggested that while discussing these may be a good ice-breaker, focusing on solving them is not particularly useful.
The Graduate! Network’s Data That Move Us (DTMU) project uses data collected by Network communities as well as national datasets to evaluate and demonstrate the value and impact of the Graduate! model in each community and throughout the Network. As the Network grows and we collect and analyze more data, our knowledge base expands, improving our program design and troubleshooting. This knowledge is always passed on to communities. Based on findings and participant insights DTMU will produce recommendations for the Graduate! Network’s future efforts. The project is funded through a 3-year grant from TG, a Texas-based philanthropy, and incorporates historic Graduate! Network data wherever available for comparison (primarily from the Network’s oldest programs in Philadelphia and Memphis).

In this first phase, the project is identifying and categorizing the demographics of Comebackers and their myriad pathways to a degree. Annette Mattei, DTMU Project Manager and Principal at MetroMetrics, explained the structure of the data collected by Network communities through the Comeback Tracker CRM system, a Salesforce™-based proprietary CRM that is installed for each community. Communities in The Graduate! Network use the Comeback Tracker to collect 150 data points reflecting each Comebacker’s demographics and goals. Local program staff and advisors update these datasets to track educational pathways, programmatic interventions, and progress and outcomes through a “lifecycle” progression. The lifecycles range from leads and inquiries about services through the Graduate! programmatic activities and college coursework to graduation, post-graduation or continuation to the next academic degree. This system helps advisors track and quantify and support Comebackers’ progress, and enables program directors to monitor program and staff progress and identify problems. Since each community has a stand-alone Comeback Tracker for confidentiality reasons, in the current pilot/proof of concept stage, this project is designed to gather data from several communities. The data is stripped of individual identifying markers and aggregated. The goal is to then expand the project to include all programs and provide local as well as network-wide benchmarks and periodic progress updates.

Renee McCreight, Senior Director of Graduate Memphis, who has been using the Comeback Tracker for over three years, spoke about analyzing the data her team collects with a reporting system that is also available to all communities. She uses data from the reports to consolidate community support for Graduate Memphis. Like other communities, Graduate Memphis tracks the numbers of Comebackers who participate in the program by the pre-loaded lifecycle stages: how many connect with the program, prepare to enroll, enroll in a post-secondary institution, progress through, and their outcomes. Renee explained how data reports illustrate Graduate! Memphis’ work and impact on college attainment to funders. Using a longitudinal view, Renee can compare the outcomes of different marketing and recruitment strategies as well.

Tom Ahart, Director of College Success Services at Graduate Philadelphia, explained how he uses Comeback Tracker data to motivate and inspire staff. He recommended that communities set up the Analytic Snapshot tool on Salesforce to track how many people are in each of the lifecycle stages in a given timeframe to show Comebacker movement over time. Tom also suggested that communities can use this approach to track their yearly progress against previous years, and to measure the success of their outreach efforts. Comeback Tracker is a powerful tool and Tom suggested that communities think carefully about the problems they face in order to utilize the tool most effectively. [Editor’s Note: The Graduate! Network has engaged the Salesforce consultant who built the Comeback Tracker to help troubleshoot system issues and install new features. Consult your Network liaison and your contract with the Network to find out more about hourly consulting rates and free time.]
Michelle Freeman, President and Founder of Witty Gritty and publisher of Flying Kite, brought her marketing and social media expertise to LearnX and laid out the essential elements of a successful marketing message: demonstrate your personal connection to the work and use that to tell the bigger story of the work; don’t rattle off your mission statement, open up a little, tell them why you’re engaged in this work, then share other people’s stories. Michelle emphasized the importance of using statistics (but in thoughtful, eye-catching ways rather than lists of numbers or complex graphs). She also recommended sharing unanticipated moments and admitting fallibility to make the story more real and open doors for other people to share.

Michelle then spoke about the importance of using social media to inform and connect people that would be difficult to reach otherwise and she recommended that organizations determine which one or two social media platforms their intended audience prefers and focus efforts accordingly. Michelle recommended that communities focus on LinkedIn, Twitter or Facebook. The costs are different too. On Facebook, organizations should consider paying to boost posts or use targeted ads. With Twitter it is critical to get followers and provide visual content. Michelle stressed the importance of keeping up with changing trends in technology and analyzing which platform different audiences prefer. She also warned against using too many different types of social media and letting accounts go dormant, giving the impression that there is no activity to report. Recognizing that most organizations have limited staff resources for social media, she offered a simple schedule for building a social media presence: post a few times per week on Facebook and between one and three times daily on Twitter (one quote, one retweet, and one original tweet). Michelle also discussed ways to spread the message outside of social media by using demographic data to identify neighborhoods with high numbers of Comebackers and then establishing a presence there rather than expecting people to come to you. Two suggested actions are to sign up for an information table at community events and to buy ads in local newspapers, which is often cheaper and can be more effective than larger regional papers.

Degrees Matter! in Greensboro NC invested in creating several videos of Comebacker stories highlighting key demographic groups in Greensboro. Jason Caldwell, Director of Degrees Matter! explained that he looked for Comebackers representative of the population who were willing to share their stories. The biggest challenge was to coordinate Comebackers’ availability. Recognizing the importance of quality segment, the program invested between $4,000 and $5,000 in professional photography and editing for each video. Watch them here. After releasing each video, Degrees Matter! counted 50 new intakes within three days. When asked how he found good representatives to feature in the videos, Jason suggested building good relationships with organizations that have their own strong community, such as churches and other places of worship. These relationships can also help with recruiting Comebackers.

Lisa Hankins at Southwest Tennessee Reconnect Community uses a wrapped bus that serves as a mobile outreach center. The bus is part of a partnership with The CO, a community co-working space, and allows SW Tennessee Reconnect to cover their 14 county service area. The retrofitted school bus, which is equipped with wireless internet, computer stations, and a 3D printer, provides Lisa and her staff a way of reaching and serving rural areas that don’t have reliable internet and public transportation. Onboard the bus they visit town fairs, employers, and even a motorcycle festival where four people signed up to receive Southwest Tennessee Reconnect’s services.
The Graduate! Network communities rely a range of income streams aside from grants, including traditional fundraising from stakeholders (events tend to raise more funds than online appeals), and fee-for-service contracts with employers. However, sustainability depends on more than funding. Partnerships are important for long-term sustainability as is strong and committed leadership and personable, knowledgeable, highly trained staff. A growing number of Graduate! programs are part of collective impact coalitions that can also strengthen programs. It’s important for programs to define sustainability and a clear vision for how long and in what directions they want to grow.

Barbara Mattleman, Executive Director of Graduate! Philadelphia, stressed the importance of constant outreach to grow her program. Recognizing that anyone you meet might be a potential supporter or Comebacker, she is always looking for opportunities to mention Graduate! Philadelphia. Barbara encouraged directors to connect with champions who stick with your program, and different champions for the different facets of the organization. For example, a champion from within higher education who believes in opportunities for adults can use their position of power to advocate for Comebackers within and outside of higher education. Higher ed champions can also work to create a contractual relationship that benefits the organization, the higher education institution and Comebackers. Champions from business can contribute financial resources, business insights and a service to their employees who want to finish a college degree. Barbara was adamant about having the board of directors/Guiding Team/Vision Team help in fundraising, making it clear that fundraising is not a one person job and should not rely on staff only.

Jeanne Russell, representing the startup Upgrade San Antonio which is housed at the San Antonio Educational Partnership, and Principal at Mission Street Consulting, explained her approach to securing funds and partnerships for Upgrade. She first noted the difficulty in persuading institutions to pay for an initiative is not producing results yet. However, using professional connections, data from national sources and the Graduate! Network, and visits from the Network, Jeanne assembled both a Guiding Team and startup funders that include a community college system, employers, and local philanthropy. The San Antonio growth plan includes a strong contribution from the higher education institutions and employers.

Project Manager for KC Degrees, Cedric Deadmon, explained that Mid-America Regional Council’s (MARC) strategy is to forge partnerships between businesses, non-profits, and education. MARC commissioned a Brookings Institute study of the Kansas City economy which showed a need for increased educational attainment, especially among adults. Through strategic partnerships and with the compelling result of the Brookings Institute study, KC Degrees secured funding from various organizations before launching.

A recurring theme in this session was how to engage higher education and employer partners in a fee-for-service model, like Graduate! Philadelphia’s. Barbara offered that higher education partners benefit from the data her organization gathers on students and from having better prepared students. Hadass added that once a program achieves name recognition, partners want to be associated with it, and directors should recognize and seize the opportunity to secure funds for running the program. Jeanne spoke about opportunities to negotiate with higher ed institutions now that Texas is moving towards outcome-based funding (which could result in a loss of funding if a student doesn’t complete their degree.) Tennessee has a similar policy.
Bridging the Talent Gap

Using data to connect higher education institutions, employers and Graduate! Network resources.

Bridgett Strickler introduces the Bridging the Talent Gap process.

Bridging the Talent Gap (BTTG) is the Graduate! Network’s newest research-to-action project. It is designed to identify hiring and talent gaps in communities and create more partnerships between Graduate! communities, employers and higher ed that benefit all parties. It is a complementary strategy to Graduate!’s established practices that connect Comebackers to higher ed institutions: whereas the initial Graduate! strategy built on the Comebacker perspective to connect to higher ed and employers, BTTG builds on the employer perspective and connects to Comebackers and higher ed. The project was developed and is led by Dr. Dan Ash, Mike Kennedy and Bridgett Strickler, and is supported by Lumina Foundation. Dan Ash noted that while we hear of wonderful employers who are sympathetic to Comebackers most Graduate! communities have encountered the need for objective data. BTTG is designed to provide communities with that business intelligence and a framework for community action rather than individual employer-higher ed partnerships.

BTTG project can be seen as a road map with mile markers and mile marker one is collecting data and creating an interactive dashboard to present the data to communities. The data dashboard is highly customizable and allows users to filter data and generate insights.

In this first, proof of concept stage, BTTG is surveying senior HR employees in several Graduate! communities about hiring needs, educational attainment levels and college access. Early survey responses show that (a) competition from other employers and low numbers of applicants are pressing concerns when employers look to fill positions, and (b) the largest talent gap is in skilled trades, followed by high skill medical positions and engineers. The easiest positions to fill are administrative, customer service and human relations, and (c) although employers consider employees to be more competent when they have more education, only a quarter of respondents said their company partners with higher education institutions to create a more relevant curriculum.

Future plans for BTTG include surveying in larger sized cities and more rural areas. To get employers to commit to the survey and follow through, the BTTG team worked with SHRMs, existing consortia and influential business owners in the community. The team asked these contacts to then identify the right person who could push the survey forward at each business.

In 2017 BTTG will recruit a few more communities as funds permit. If you are interested in learning more, contact Bridgett at Graduate-Network dot org.
Two states are pioneering a state-wide application of the Graduate! model: Tennessee launched Tennessee Reconnect in early 2016 with the support of The Graduate! Network, and Graduate! Rhode Island is scheduled to roll out in early 2017. Jessica Gibson, Assistant Executive Director of Policy, Planning, and Research for Postsecondary Completion at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, introduced Tennessee’s Drive to 55, a set of related programs designed to meet the state’s goal of 55% of Tennesseans obtaining a degree by 2025. The programming covers engagement of potential students, increased enrollment in a two or four year or credential granting program, supports for raising graduation rates, and connecting new grads to employers and workforce organizations. Tennessee recognized early on that to meet the 55% goal it had to steer opportunities and resources to adults who started college but did not finish. Based in part on the Graduate! Network model, the Tennessee Higher Ed Commission developed Tennessee Reconnect. Eight TN Reconnect communities were launched in 2016, supported by state funding and a grant from Lumina Foundation, and several were represented at LearnX 2016. One hallmark of the Tennessee Reconnect program is statewide partnerships between the Department of Labor and Workforce, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Veterans’ Services, designed to serve employees and residents. If your state is considering a similar approach, look at Drive to 55 or contact Kathy at Graduate-Network dot org.

Maria Carvalho, Director for Postsecondary Transition and Success of The College Crusade of Rhode Island is a partner in leading Graduate! Rhode Island. In a concerted effort to engage champions from higher education, local government, and business, Maria and her team reached out to five mayors. Maria noted that one of the challenges they faced was the need to clarify to higher educational institutions that the program was designed to augment, not replace their outreach, recruitment and persistence services.

Renee McCreight, Director of Graduate Memphis, noted that while Graduate Memphis preceded and indeed helped set the stage for Tennessee Reconnect, joining the statewide initiative increased Graduate Memphis’ outreach and exposure, increased their access to state and local data and overall increased their capacity to support adult learners.

The potential power of statewide strategies and how they can inform regional efforts.
Kathleen Mandlehr, Interim Director of Degrees Work in Louisville, KY, described how higher education institutions can benefit from partnering with Degrees Work: by connecting adult learners to colleges, by sending the institutions better prepared students, and by sharing innovations within the Degrees Work network of partner colleges. When partner college advisors and directors hear about other programs, they often find a way to adopt or adapt them in their own institution. Ultimately, Comebackers benefit from all three outcomes. Degrees Work started out with seven institutions and ensured a broad range of degree programs and modalities. Degrees Work also enjoys the support of two consecutive mayors and local political power of one of its backbone organizations 55,000 Degrees. Kathleen noted that it is important for directors and program leadership to understand that they are part of a national movement led by The Graduate! Network, that they are not just an isolated project.

Robert Johnson, Executive Director of Education Matters Southern Indiana, provided insight and inside knowledge from a university’s perspective from his experience at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. Robert emphasized the importance of first building trust with higher education institutions, then working together to create career pathways and reverse transfer programs that help Comebackers succeed. Robert also noted that data show higher education institutions that many people are stopping out of college, but not the reasons why. He suggested that there is potential for The Network to help identify these reasons.

William Parshall, Director of Temple University Center City (TUCC) explained Temple’s services for adult students and how their partnership with Graduate! Philadelphia has aided both TUCC and their adult student population. In order to better serve adults, TUCC has flexible schedules, offering almost all classes at night, on the weekends, or online. William explained that Graduate! Philadelphia assures Comebackers that they do belong in college, steers them towards a college and program in which they will succeed, and provides one-on-one advising services as needed. William reported that Comebackers who come from Graduate! Philadelphia are better prepared to succeed in college, which is a tremendous value for TUCC.

The Q&A period of this session centered on the value and investment in formal agreements between Graduate! programs and higher ed institutions. Kathleen explained how she tailors each memorandum of agreement (MoA) to an institution’s specific needs. William explained how creating an MoA that is compliant with the institution can be complicated, time consuming, and can be seen as an obstacle. William also noted the value of being part of a longer lasting partnership, like Graduate! Philadelphia: when Mayors, college Presidents and trustees come and go, they may have different interests. Graduate! helps keep the issue of adult completers important even when the political scene and leadership changes.

(left to right) Kathleen Mandlehr, Robert Johnson and William Parshall discuss the keys to a partnership with higher eds.
Dan Ash examines an exhibit at the Chemical Heritage Foundation, a chemistry museum and the site of LearnX 2016.