

BRIDGING THE TALENT GAP

TGN@CAEL

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BRIDGETT STRICKLER

Bridging The Talent Gap Case Study: Tools for Building a Well-aligned Industry, Education, and Workforce

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Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, CAEL fosters a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

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ABOUT CAEL

Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; and foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive.

Via integrated education and workforce strategies, CAEL fosters partnership development that aligns postsecondary institutions and other learning providers, employers, and workforce and economic development organizations to better connect learners to careers and promote social and economic mobility. By working with stakeholders across the workforce ecosystem, we help build partnerships that promote learner success, minimize unemployment, and create competitive communities that attract local and regional employers. A national membership organization established in 1974, [CAEL](#) is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of [Strada Collaborative](#).

We have provided initiative support and technical assistance on many regional and national-level projects. We continually focus on:

- Social and economic mobility of learners.
- Strategic partnership development.
- Data gathering and analysis, strategy development, goal setting, and tracking.
- Acceleration of credential completion by recognizing on-the-job and other non-institutional training, credit for prior learning, and stackable credentials.

In 2023, CAEL announced a strategic partnership with The Graduate! Network (TGN) — a mission aligned national nonprofit — to operate TGN’s core portfolio of products and services as [TGN@CAEL](#), including: navigator training curricula that have been honed through more than a score of implementations of the Graduate! model; data tracking adults in their journey to and through postsecondary education; and [Bridging The Talent Gap](#), a proven approach to activating employers and talent ecosystems in support of educational equity.

If you’d like more information about CAEL’s Bridging The Talent Gap initiative, please contact:

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Executive Summary

CAEL's Bridging the Talent Gap (BTTG) Employee Survey is a powerful tool for employers who want to support the career and education aspirations of their workers. In fall 2020, [One Acadiana](#), an economic development organization in South Louisiana, sponsored a Bridging the Talent Gap Employee Survey at MacLaff, Inc. At the time of the survey, [MacLaff, Inc.](#) employed more than 2,200 workers, including many frontline workers, throughout a chain of 45 McDonald's franchises. Here are key highlights from this work. In 2023, MacLaff, Inc. employed about 2,800 workers.



NOTABLE FINDINGS

Most respondents plan on completing a credential.



Approximately **85 percent of crew members** (frontline workers who are not crew leaders/trainers, shift leaders, or department leaders), **planned on pursuing a credential** (inclusive of a high school diploma or equivalency), with 45 percent aspiring to a bachelor's degree.

There are significant discrepancies between employees' understanding of education benefits and the actual education benefits available.



Although McDonald's offers the Archways to Opportunity program, **only 35 percent** of those surveyed indicated that their **employer provided financial support** for college-level coursework.

One-third of respondents are potential Comebackers — or adult learners who aspire to pursue an education credential to advance their economic mobility.



Thirty-two percent of the **MacLaff, Inc. employee survey participants** were **25 or older** at the time they took the survey.

SURVEY SUCCESSES

High employee participation

In total, **382 employees participated** in the survey, equating to a 17 percent response rate at the time of the survey in 2020. This level of engagement is especially significant given that frontline service sector employees often do not have company email addresses, and retail workers in particular may not use a computer in the workplace.



Post-survey employee engagement

About **50 crew members expressed interest** in learning more about the **Archways to Opportunity** program from their employer; and **One Acadiana and CAEL worked together to assign about 120 interested employees to an appropriate college advisor** to assist them with finding a program that aligned with their interests and goals.

CONCLUSION

Frontline workers make up a significant part of the workforce, and given the need to upskill/reskill to access rewarding career paths in an evolving workforce landscape, now more than ever, it is important to discuss how employers are supporting their staff.

MacLaff, Inc.'s participation in the survey highlights the educational goals and ambitions that frontline staff have.

Introduction

The Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey is a powerful tool for employers who want to support the career development and educational attainment of their employees, including frontline service sector employees.

Bridging The Talent Gap is a nationally proven tool that engages employers in a regional survey campaign to support the growth of a skilled and educated workforce. Survey results help employers, employees, learning providers, and community stakeholders identify interest in education and training, opportunities for regional partnership, and gaps in employee knowledge of existing training programs. Designed especially to help entry-level employees, the tool supports equitable talent development and retention initiatives, whether at the regional or employer level, and provides a way to baseline and track goal attainment. Participating communities and employers find that the survey and subsequent activities boost participation in training and learning programs, as well as help build regional partnerships.

In the fall of 2020, One Acadiana, a business-led, privately funded economic development organization representing over 600 businesses and individuals in a nine-parish (county) area in South Louisiana, engaged area employers and their employees in BTTG.

“One Acadiana focused on Bridging The Talent Gap as a key strategy to advance our 55 by 25 initiative, with the goal of increasing the proportion of working-age adults in our region with degrees or credentials beyond high school to 55 percent by 2025,” says André Breaux, vice president of Policy Initiatives and Governmental Affairs. “Employer and employee engagement are key to reaching this goal, by encouraging employer support and adult learner reengagement.”

This case study highlights one South Louisiana employer’s experience with the BTTG Employee Survey: MacLaff, Inc., which operates 45 McDonald’s restaurants in and around the region.

MacLaff, Inc.’s participation in the BTTG Employee Survey was notable for two main reasons: the large number of MacLaff, Inc. employees who responded to the survey, and the fact that MacLaff, Inc.’s workforce consists primarily of frontline service sector employees, a population of the workforce that is often left out of talent development conversations.

“Our partnership with MacLaff, Inc., on Bridging The Talent Gap allowed us to engage a large retail sector employer to amplify their efforts to support their employees’ education,” says Breaux. “Because of the success of this partnership, we awarded MacLaff, Inc.’s training supervisor, Charletta Thomas — who is a Comebacker herself — with our annual 55 by 25 Accelerator Award for accelerating progress toward our 55 by 25 goal.” Since the time of this case study, Thomas also completed an M.B.A.



“Our partnership with MacLaff, Inc., on Bridging The Talent Gap allowed us to engage a large retail sector employer to amplify their efforts to support their employees’ education.”

André Breaux
One Acadiana

Notable Findings

The BTTG Employee Survey provides a comprehensive view of the employee education ecosystem by detailing the following five areas:

- Education status.
- Current educational pursuit.
- Plans for future education.
- Reasons for not pursuing future education.
- Employee perception of employer support for education.



MOST RESPONDENTS PLAN ON COMPLETING A CREDENTIAL

One of the most significant findings from MacLaff, Inc.'s employee survey is that the vast majority of survey participants who were crew members (not trainers or leaders) said they planned on completing a credential (85%), and overall, 87 percent of employees at all levels, including crew members, trainers and leaders, planned to pursue an education credential. In other words, only 15 percent of crew members — and 17 percent of employees at all levels — indicated that they did not plan on completing a credential.

Of particular note is the number of survey participants who said they were planning on completing a bachelor's degree. While only two percent of employee survey participants held a bachelor's degree at the time of the survey, fully 40 percent planned on completing a bachelor's degree in the future.

Here are the other credentials that respondents indicated they plan to complete:



32%
High school diploma
or equivalent



15%
Certificate or
technical credential



25%
Associate degree



13%
Advanced degree

THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN EMPLOYEES' UNDERSTANDING OF EDUCATION BENEFITS AND THE ACTUAL EDUCATION BENEFITS AVAILABLE.

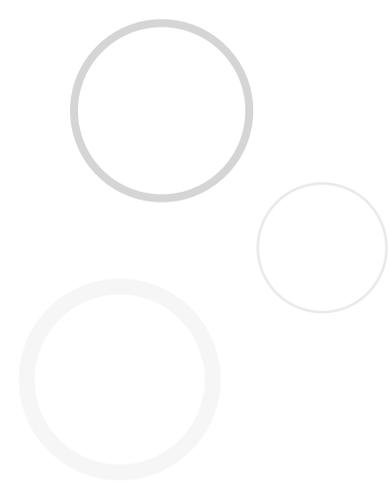
A high proportion of survey participants (40 percent) plan to continue their education through a bachelor's degree. This figure is even greater (45 percent) among frontline crew. Unfortunately, the data suggest a "pent-up" process in which the majority of those completing the survey were not aware of the generous education benefits offered by the Archways to Opportunity program. Only 35 percent of those taking the survey indicated that their employer provides financial support for college-level coursework. This finding is unfortunately consistent with virtually every community participating in the BTTG initiative and points to enormous opportunity for employers to review their communication and outreach methods to ensure employees are aware of and can easily access all education benefits available to them. The pent-up need is especially troubling given that 69 percent of respondents are Black, 72 percent are female, and 37 percent are still working on completion of their high school diploma. Research from the Institute for Higher Education Policy in 2021 showed that college completion is a powerful predictor of economic mobility for students of color.¹

Employers can offer noteworthy opportunities for such life advantages by redoubling their effort to reach out to all employees regarding education benefits to ensure understandable and accessible pathways to postsecondary education, and the BTTG Employee Survey is one method for this type of outreach.

ONE-THIRD OF RESPONDENTS ARE POTENTIAL COMEBACKERS — ADULT STUDENTS WHO WANT TO COMPLETE A COLLEGE DEGREE OR CREDENTIAL

While it can be hard to pinpoint exactly who potential Comebackers are, age is often used as the defining characteristic of this population, with nontraditional students being defined as those over the age of 24.² Thirty-two percent of the MacLaff, Inc. employee survey participants were 25 or older at the time they took the survey.

What is more, fully 29 percent of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 46. This is significant because CAEL's data on Comebackers show that re-enrollment rates peak at age 39 and graduation rates peak at age 46, after which completion rates decline.³ This one-third of respondents are in a sort of demographic "sweet spot" when it comes to returning to college.



¹ Equitable Value: Promoting Mobility and Social Justice through Postsecondary Education: <https://www.postsecondaryvalue.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PVC-Final-Report-FINAL.pdf>

² National Center for Educational Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>

³ Reported by TGN@CAEL's Data That Move Us project in 2018.

Survey Successes

HIGH EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

One of the major successes of MacLaff, Inc.'s participation in the BTTG Employee Survey was their ability to get a large number of their employees to respond to the survey: 382 in total, a 17 percent response rate. This response is especially significant given that frontline service sector employees often do not have company email addresses, making surveying this sector challenging.⁴

MacLaff, Inc.'s strong commitment to providing educational opportunities for their employees through the Archways to Opportunity program helped lay the foundation for this robust response.

According to Charletta Thomas, MacLaff, Inc.'s training supervisor, MacLaff, Inc. had the most participants in the Archways to Opportunity program and utilized the most funding for continuing education and tuition assistance during the 2019–2020 academic year — a quarter of a million dollars. By way of the BTTG Employee Survey, about 50 employees expressed interest in learning more about the Archways to Opportunity program, and another eight said they weren't interested now, but might be in the future.

"It doesn't have to pertain to any McDonald's curriculum," Charletta says. "We want them to be productive citizens within our community so they can go out and share that and bring more new people to us. We call that 'good turnover.'"

Working from this strong foundation, MacLaff, Inc. employed the following tactics in order to achieve this outstanding level of employee participation:

- Made survey completion a priority with shift leaders and managers.
- Held a contest with a prize for the restaurant that had the highest number of survey participants.
- Allowed employees 10 minutes on the clock to complete the survey.
- Provided a QR code to make it easy for employees to take the survey on their smartphones.
- Ran the survey for a set period of time (two weeks).

These tactics can be replicated and adapted by other companies with similar workforces.



"We want them to be productive citizens within our community so they can go out and share that and bring more new people to us. We call that 'good turnover.'"

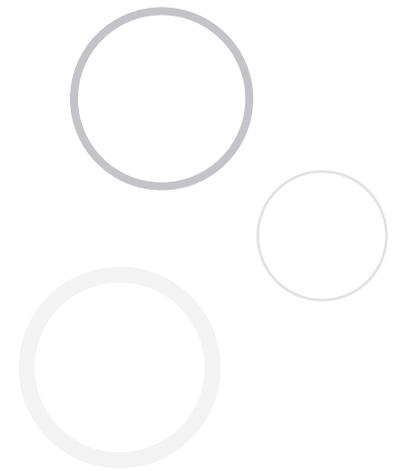
Charletta Thomas
MacLaff, Inc.

⁴ According to recent analysis of this issue, the average response rate of surveys has dropped below 10% as people's attention spans when using technology has declined over the years (<http://www.vernonresearch.com/b2b-v-b2c-understanding-and-recognizing-the-key-differences/>). Also, long-form surveys (about 15 questions) often have response rates near 0%. Our achievement given the length of the survey is remarkable.

POST-SURVEY EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

MacLaff, Inc. participants were given the opportunity to schedule a follow-up appointment with staff from area institutions of higher education about how to achieve their educational goals and/or to connect back to their employer for more information about their education benefits program. By way of the BTTG Employee Survey, about 50 crew members requested follow up from MacLaff, Inc. for additional information about the Archways to Opportunity program, and about 120 individuals expressed interest in follow up from an education professional to assist them with their education goals (please note: some individuals expressed interest in both being connected back to MacLaff, Inc. and being connected to an education professional). One Acadiana and CAEL worked together to refer interested individuals back to MacLaff, Inc. and/or to the appropriate higher education institution, with One Acadiana liaising between MacLaff, Inc. and the institutions to ensure ongoing support for the workers.

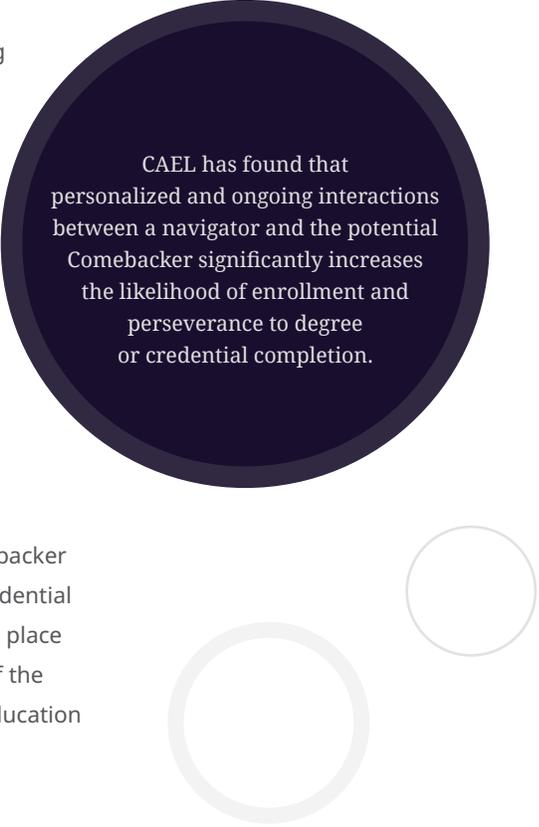
The fact that several area institutions of higher education came together to make this happen was also a huge success. This partnership included two local community colleges: Baton Rouge Community College and South Louisiana Community College (SLCC), with 35 MacLaff, Inc. employees being referred to BRCC and 84 being referred to SLCC. Referrals were based on the geographic location of their workplace and its proximity to one of the two institutions.



Lessons Learned

While area institutions of higher education conducted outreach to interested survey participants as planned, the subsequent plan to have them take over ongoing tracking and communication did not come to fruition. All parties involved agree that the outreach would have been more successful if South Louisiana had in place what CAEL refers to as “neutral navigators”: individuals unaffiliated with a particular institution whose role it is to help potential students overcome barriers keeping them from attending college. That being said, communities that do have neutral navigators need to be prepared to manage the influx of interest from potential Comebackers that can result from something like the BTTG Employee Survey.

CAEL research shows that moving an interested adult from thinking about re-engaging with education to enrolling in a program takes more than a single interaction or intervention from a trusted professional. In fact, CAEL has found that personalized and ongoing interactions between a navigator and the potential Comebacker significantly increase the likelihood of enrollment and perseverance to degree or credential completion. This further underscores the importance of having neutral navigators in place who can conduct ongoing outreach, walking potential students through each step of the process and assisting with any setbacks the Comebacker may experience on their education journey. You can read more about this research at TGN@CAEL [here](#).



CAEL has found that personalized and ongoing interactions between a navigator and the potential Comebacker significantly increases the likelihood of enrollment and perseverance to degree or credential completion.

Conclusion

The results of MacLaff, Inc.'s participation in the BTTG Employee Survey helped create a long-overdue shift in the conversation about who needs support for educational advancement, and it raises important questions about how employers and communities can better support frontline service sector employees. Frontline workers make up a significant part of the workforce, and given the need to upskill/reskill to access rewarding career paths in an evolving workforce landscape, now more than ever, it is important to discuss how employers are supporting their staff. MacLaff, Inc.'s participation in the survey highlights the educational goals and ambitions that frontline staff have.

MacLaff, Inc.'s survey results also demonstrate that frontline service sector employees can be strong candidates for internal development programs, which more and more employers are coming to view as a smart investment in employee retention and overall cost reduction. What is more, the survey process serves as an effective conversation starter with employees about their employer's educational benefits.

For employers looking to support the career development and educational attainment of their employees, including frontline service sector employees, the Bridging the Talent Gap employee survey can be a powerful tool.

Of additional note, MacLaff, Inc., has formed a partnership with South Louisiana Community College providing additional benefits to their employees who are pursuing education through the Archways to Opportunity program. MacLaff, Inc. employees who are attending SLCC full time are eligible for an additional \$500 scholarship for up to four semesters, and part-time students are eligible for an additional \$250 scholarship.



Frontline workers make up a significant part of the workforce, and given the need to upskill/reskill to access rewarding career paths in an evolving workforce landscape, now more than ever, it is important to discuss how employers are supporting their staff.

October 2023 Update

One Acadiana recently reported that the MacLaff, Inc. partnership has inspired a similar partnership with Miller Management, which operates 10 McDonald's stores in the Acadiana region and four stores on the West Bank of New Orleans. Not one to rest on laurels, when approached by Miller Management, One Acadiana quickly moved to solve for the lack of an institution-neutral education navigator — an education professional unaffiliated with a particular institution whose role it is to help potential students overcome barriers keeping them from attending college — that was noted in the *Lessons Learned* section. To fill this role, support for Miller Management's workers will come from SLCC's [TRiO Educational Opportunity Centers](#). TRiO Educational Opportunity Centers are federally funded through the US Department of Education and were the first national college access and retention programs to address cultural and socioeconomic barriers to educational access in America.

Since 2019–2020, South Louisiana Community College has provided **an additional \$19,250** in tuition waivers and scholarships to McDonald's employees throughout Acadiana. This is on top of the educational assistance that the Archways to Opportunity program provides to McDonald's employees.

Since 2017, MacLaff, Inc. employees have been awarded over \$1.5 million in tuition dollars through Archways to Opportunity. And year-to-date, through October 30, 2023, MacLaff, Inc. employees have received nearly \$200,000 in tuition with four percent of their employee roster participating. Additionally, \$5,500 in high school diploma tuition has been awarded in 2023.