
2020

ICEA Excellence Awards Innovative New Ideas



**GREATER
FORT WAYNE INC.**
METRO CHAMBER ALLIANCE

**BRIDGE
PROGRAM**

Bridging the gap between startup and success



Program/Initiative Summary

The [GFW Inc. Bridge Program](#) “bridges the gap between start-up and success,” connecting local startups with established corporations to build a stronger entrepreneurial community in Allen County. Serving in our unique position as a convener, we formally brought together our local startup and corporate communities for the first time, inspiring corporate leaders to give of their time, talent, and treasure to help early-stage businesses succeed. In the program’s first year, 15 corporate partners and 15 entrepreneurs are working together, with startups already achieving remarkable success.



Needs Identification

Entrepreneurship is a critical component in our mission of building a nationally recognized economy. Startup companies can create explosive job growth, which fuels community vibrancy. While our community has historically been a center of innovation, in recent decades Allen County has experienced a decline in patent activity.



In 2017, Techstars, a worldwide startup incubator and accelerator, visited Fort Wayne to research our startup ecosystem. They found that while elements of a successful startup scene were in place, our community was not yet a mature atmosphere for growing startup companies. Three of the main challenges Techstars identified were:

1. Creating/changing the startup community’s culture.
2. Building mentorship relationships for startup founders
3. Integrating the startup community with local corporations.



Finally, our staff met with 15 local entrepreneurial support organizations, as well as entrepreneurs themselves, to hear firsthand what the most pressing needs were, and to avoid duplication of efforts.

Based on our findings, we knew we could play a role as a convener, targeting entrepreneurs and corporate leaders to come together to build a better startup culture in our community.

Program Objectives

We developed the Bridge Program with these objectives:

- Create opportunities for the corporate community to support the local startup community
- Offer targeted chamber resources to help entrepreneurs and their businesses succeed
- Increase participation in the chamber among entrepreneurs, and expose them to the value of chamber membership
- Increase chamber engagement and investment among corporate sponsors
- Build brand awareness for all participating companies

Accomplishing these objectives will help develop our local entrepreneurial ecosystem. A strong environment for startups directly contributes to our mission of building a nationally recognized economy.

Methodology and [Budget](#)

To meet our objectives, we looked to create a program that leverages our strengths—and those of our member businesses—to serve entrepreneurs. Key tenets of the program include:

- Asking corporate partners to serve as Bridge Investors, going “above the rate card” to subsidize their chosen startup’s chamber dues for a five-year period. This would expose entrepreneurs to the benefits of chamber membership at a reduced price point, while bringing the entrepreneurs’ unique perspectives into the chamber. The fees also cover the costs of Bridge events and programming—staff time, venue fees, and more.
- Offering exclusive networking events, just for program participants. These events would help entrepreneurs and corporate leaders get to know each other and share expertise.
- Delivering business coaching sessions to Bridge Entrepreneurs, helping them find and maximize their innate talents and improve as an entrepreneur. Our director of leadership programs, a certified Clifton Strengths coach, facilitated these sessions.

**“WE’RE AT THE
FORMATIVE STAGE.
THAT’S ACTUALLY GOOD NEWS—
WE DON’T HAVE TO BREAK
A LOT OF STUFF.”**

- Chris Heivly
VP of Innovation at Techstars



Communications

To make the biggest splash possible, we announced the program launch at our Annual Meeting event, with 600+ people in attendance. The announcement, combined with other tactics, created significant buzz within the entrepreneurial community and the community as a whole.

Additional communications included:

- Press releases announcing the [program launch](#) (including where to apply), the [approaching application deadline](#), and [inaugural class](#) of Bridge Entrepreneur companies.
- Speaking opportunities at local entrepreneurial support organization meetings, with our staff members encouraging hundreds of local entrepreneurs to apply for entry into the program.
- A [slipsheet](#) for entrepreneurs, explaining the program benefits, displaying the Bridge Investor companies' logos, and encouraging entrepreneurs to apply for entry.
- A small ["reminder card"](#) for entrepreneurs, including basic program information and the application website URL.
- Social media posts targeting entrepreneurs, with a link to the application page, reminding them about the application deadline.
- A tent/kiosk at Startup Village, an event where local residents could learn the basics of how to start a business.
- A featured event during Startup Week Fort Wayne, including a [presentation](#) about the Bridge Program and a Q&A session with Bridge Investors and Bridge Entrepreneurs giving testimonials about program benefits.



Bridging the gap between startup and success

THIS PROGRAM GIVES YOU:



CONNECTIONS

An ally in the corporate community, plus opportunities to connect with local business leaders



COACHING

Founder-focused coaching to build a thriving business and a talented, effective team



TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

Exclusive discounts, GFW Inc. investor-only events, access to meeting space, and much more

Learn more and apply at bridge.gfwinc.com



BRIDGE PROGRAM

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startup and success*

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Evaluation

In the program's first year, we purposely limited the cohort to 15 Bridge Investors, each paired with a Bridge Entrepreneur. Nearly 50 entrepreneurs applied to be part of the cohort, showing strong community interest in the program. Of the 15 selected to become Bridge Entrepreneurs, several had expressed hopes of becoming chamber members as a long-term business goal, but were waiting to get more established before joining. The Bridge Program fast-tracked that process.

The program has also helped entrepreneurs become better businesspeople. Many Bridge Investors have strong connections to their Bridge Entrepreneurs' missions, which has led to exceptional partnerships and mentor-mentee relationships. The one-on-one coaching sessions with our staff have been productive, as well.

Brand awareness has increased for all involved; for example, about 250 people attended an event at Startup Week Fort Wayne, where GFW Inc. and the Bridge Program were featured. Program participants took part in a Q&A session talking about their businesses, entrepreneurship, and the benefits of the Bridge Program.

We have seen Bridge Entrepreneurs' businesses blossom: Mercadito Taqueria, a popular food truck, has announced plans to move into a brick-and-mortar location on The Landing, Fort Wayne's original business district which was recently revitalized. House to Home, a furniture boutique and real estate staging firm, is also moving into a storefront on The Landing, which was a longtime goal of owner Beth Stutzman. "We always imagined our store being there (on The Landing), but we weren't sure if—or when—it would happen," Stutzman said. "Now, our dream is coming true!" Another Bridge Investor invited their Bridge Entrepreneur to speak at a high-profile event about female entrepreneurship.

As the program has gained traction, additional companies have expressed interest in becoming Bridge Investors for a second cohort, which will begin later in 2020.

45+
ENTREPRENEURS
APPLIED

15
ENTREPRENEURS
SELECTED

250
ATTENDEES
AT STARTUP
WEEK EVENT

