

46 Braided Funding and Alignment for Program Sustainability



Braided funding and alignment of partnerships are key when creating sustainable systems and programs for your community. Lyndsie Gibbs and Alex Lovrien from Metropolitan Community College in Omaha join us on Episode 46 of Ready for Work. The partnerships across this Work Ready Community grew a small, data-driven, proof of concept into a \$10M venture that has eliminated financial barriers so individuals can access quality training, education, and gainful employment. Listen in for best practices on braided funding, opportunities and obstacles, tips to get started, and lessons learned.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 46



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Links and Resources

- [Episode 46 of Podcast](#)
- [Workforce Innovation Division at Metropolitan Community College](#)
- [Presentation Handout from Braided Funding Workshop at ACT Workforce Summit](#)
- [Workforce Summit Overview from ACT](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 46

Jingle Open with Music: Let's Get Ready for Work

Lyndsie: When you're researching your other opportunities for your leverage funds, data, qualitative and quantitative, matter. And so, if you have a really robust program that you invested in that you're working on now, that data is going to be critical in your next applications or next opportunities of seeking funds.

Jasen: Braided funding and alignment of partnerships are key when creating sustainable systems and programs for your community. Lyndsie Gibbs and Alex Lovrien from Metropolitan Community College in Omaha join us on Episode 46 of Ready for Work. The partnerships across this Work Ready Community grew a small, data-driven, proof of concept into a \$10M venture that

has eliminated financial barriers so individuals can access quality training, education, and gainful employment.

Ready for Work Jingle Open

Jasen: Alex Lovrein and Lyndsie Gibbs, combined, have over 17 years of experience working in fields where braided funding was key in the development and success of programs. In their current roles, they collaborate by aligning goals and partnerships to drive innovation in their community. Currently, they manage over 10M in funds to eliminate financial barriers for individuals to gain access to quality training, education, and gainful employment.

In this workshop recorded at the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville, Alex and Lyndsie share their insights on braiding funding, aligning goals, and developing key partnerships. We'll begin with a quick overview of the work at Metro Community College and a deeper dive into braided funding.

Lyndsie: So, a little bit about us. So why are we here at ACT talking about our rate of funding? We are currently a work ready community through Douglas County, through our initiative with the in CRC in the works curriculum. So from 2018 to date, we now have, I believe, over 4900 NCRCs that have been issued in our community, which is huge for our community.

Alex: A little bit about MCC, we are actually from the Community and Workforce Education Division where we focus on non-credit credentialing that leads individuals into employment. We have about 585,000 residents in Douglas County alone, but we serve three other counties. We have over ten different satellite location campuses. These can be express sites, collaborative sites with community partners or our main campuses. In 2018-19, we had over 200,000 non-credit contact hours with our students. So that's pretty impactful with the work that we're doing. And it also shows a need to braid these findings so we can continue to serve everybody.

Lyndsie: So, what is braiding funding? Braiding funding is a practice of combining multiple funding sources to support a particular program in or initiative. With our programs, although our department, we are with the Community Workforce Education Department division, we've primarily focused on short term industry recognized credentialing and certifications. Our shortest credential is two weeks. Our longest credential is about nine months. It's a code school. Actually, I think that just got extended to about a year. So for us, it's really everything that a typical higher education institution on the credit side can't do or doesn't have the ability to do.

So currently we have about, what, 32 different non-credit short term training programs that we currently offer. And now we're starting to bridge into credit, bridging into credit now we are able to serve students and prospective career seekers not only from 32 programs, but now upward to 200 plus programs in our community, which is huge for our institution, which also meant that we needed to really figure out how we are going to braid our funding and leverage the funds that we have to ensure that we are creating pathways from non-credit to credit for any and everybody, no matter what credential they're coming into the door with or earning while they're working with us.

So, we have Career Forward, which is funded by the American Rescue Plan Act. We have about \$9 million that was allocated to our community college over the course of four years. That's the program that really spearheaded us being able to now serve not only non-credit students, but non-credit students. So going from 32 programs to over 200 programs. We also have the Gap Assistance program, which is state funding. Alex actually is the director of that program. That one primarily serves non-credit training, but we do have some credit trainings that students could enroll in. We also have adult basic education funds through private donors and state of Nebraska. And then we have some other grant funds that come in, like EDA funds, Build Back Better funds. We have other grants with like jobs for the future. It's just like mini grants that come in that usually aren't on the scale of like millions and millions million dollar dollars, usually about 2 million and under. And then we have federal funding with the snap Employment and Training program, which again, Alex is the director of that program.

What does that mean? That's a lot of funds. So collectively, our division oversees about \$20 million in grant funds that we are able to utilize to really keep our operations moving forward and serve every student that wants or needs education that may not have financial means in order to do that. So, what does that mean? Those funds, the way we have braided it, covers majority, what, 80% of our staff members, and that's full time salary staff members, covers 100% of tuition fees, books, supplies, credential costs, and pays our students \$16 an hour for being in of class time.

On top of that, it also offers hardship assistance. So if we have somebody that needs rental assistance, transportation assistance, clothing for an interview, clothing for their first day of work, and to continue their first day of work, first week or month work, etc.. And then also on top of that, it also covers all the supportive services and integrated support that we have.

So, for almost all of our technical training programs, we also use integrated education and training. So that means, along with a technical instructor, we have another individual that is in that classroom with those individuals supporting them through that curriculum, helping them with any deficiencies, math, English language, making sure that they also have the tools to be successful in that classroom and supporting them through that technical training.

Jasen: Next, Alex walks us through the participant flow for eligibility determination and alternative funding as needed.

Alex: So, this is kind of along the lines of what Lindsey was just talking about. Our career skills coaches, they screen the students for eligibility. They're going to go in and meet with our students and they're going to say, okay, we know gap funding is a once-in-a-lifetime funding source. Have you used this funding? If not, then we'll continue with the application process. If you've already used it, then we're going to look at the other funding mechanisms that we have in place to screen you for eligibility with those. And then the application process is completed. The applications themselves, go through a quality check and we verify that they are indeed eligible. From there, they get registered their tuition support, textbooks, supplies, exams, everything is covered, and then they get that workforce support grant. Our hope is that by providing all of these services and braiding the funding together, everything, all of that, is going into the student and that's increasing the student success in the program and into the workforce.

Music up to jingle

Jasen: In our next segment of the podcast, Lyndsie shares opportunities to consider along the journey to funding sustainability and Alex helps us identify potential obstacles and ways to overcome challenges.

Lyndsie: With every funding that you receive, there's going to be opportunities and obstacles, right? We're going to be very transparent about some of the opportunities and obstacles that we have experienced through this journey in terms of some of the opportunities that we have experienced. And again, it is very specific to our institution and our funding mechanisms that we receive.

Obviously, increased resources. When you have increased resources, you can serve more folks, you can hire more folks. And let's be honest, we all need folks to help move the initiatives that we are all working on.

Greater impact Potential. One of the biggest goals that we have as a department and a division, and you'll hear our executive director say it all the time. She wants to end poverty. Well, how do you end poverty? By education? By knowledge. Knowledge is the most powerful tool that you can give an individual that can never be taken away from them. The more education and training we can provide, the more knowledge we provide, the more successful that person is able to be in their future. Increase collaboration.

So, with all of the funding mechanisms that we listed, there is a required collaboration in some sort. We work very closely with our American Job Center, with our WIOA partners, and also with our businesses. We cannot create training programs without at least three businesses signing off that, yes, this is a training program with certifications that align to job openings that we would hire for. We can't do that. We can't do anything without them at the table.

Holistic solutions. We know that working with students and working with clients, there are situations are very individualized. There is never a one stop. This is how we're going to deal with this solution at this time. I like to say the reason why I like coming to work every day is because every day is so different, and you never know what you're walking into. You never know what problem you might have to solve, what issue might arise, what much challenge. But also, you never know what wins and successes you're going to walk into There's so many different ways that we can work with our students and be able to serve our students and clients, that it truly does allow us to have more of a holistic solution.

Also, goal alignment. So, for all of the funding mechanisms that we have, we ensure that our goals at the end of the day are aligned and most of the time it's around how many students are you serving, your employment post training rate? There needs to be a threshold there, but then also a certification rate. How many students are you saying are going to meet their credentials or complete their program and then end up getting into employment and then retention six months, post employment.

Those are standardized goal alignment in almost every grant application and every funding that we have, but also split costs match. So, I know not everybody always has the opportunity to do this because in order to split cost match, you usually got to have funds already on the table. I know that that can be very difficult for some folks, but for our institution it tends to be a little bit easier because we typically already have funds that are allocated that then we're able to match. That way when we apply for the next grant, we can just kind of keep using those same matches every single time.

We also have a grant accounting department that literally monitors that for us. I love having a grant accounting person that can help us monitor who's a match, how much they're match. Were they 50%, 40%? What's your indirect what your direct. They're amazing at that.

And then program staff sustainability. And this is probably the biggest opportunity. And again, going back to my executive director, the one thing that she has been amazing about, is when one grant is about to end, before it ends, we have another grant or program starting. That way in terms of program and staff sustainability, they just roll over to that new one. I've been at the college for about seven years and have yet ever seen anybody be let go from a program due to funding being ended. We are always rolling over and the good part is when you roll over, it's the same program alignment, same goal alignment. You just keep doing what you're doing, you keep making that impact, you keep continuing the great work that you're doing.

Alex: So, some of the obstacles, complexity of resources. In this I think about the opportunity is increased resources. Yes, but the complexity is okay, which funding stream needs this again? I mean, even yesterday I was like, Lindsey was back there and I was presenting. I was like, Hey, what was that percentage? So, it's just making sure that you have all of your notes and you are seeing in alignment with all of the funding streams that you have for your resources.

Greater impact potential, that's that accountability. Yes. You want to provide that huge impact, while also making sure that you're not losing anything anywhere. You're meeting the grant deliverables, you're meeting the funding goals, while also meeting everything that the student needs, your staff needs, so that accountability.

Increased collaboration. The obstacle there is the fragmented integration. Now, if you're working together and you're communicating and you're collaborating, everything can be streamlined, but

when it is fragmented, it's very noticeable. We've been there, we've worked through this thinking about our integrated education and training programs. You know, when you're in your infancy, in your learning and you're growing, there are pieces. It's like, Oh shoot! I didn't put it in this database. I put it in this one. There's fragmentation in who should be doing this because it's attached to this funding piece. But this person is doing this. Really it's just having those clear roles, understanding who's doing what, working together and collaborating. And that goes right into the administrative challenges that I was just speaking of.

Goal alignment also can be an obstacle if we're not ahead of it. The change management when we're off boarding one grant, onboarding the other, making sure that the communication is streamlined. Again, Lindsey's talking about our executive director. She's great at grants and then communicating when one's ending and when one is coming on and making sure all those goals are aligned. But as with everywhere you go, some people who don't like change, some people who do like change. It's working with that individual, knowing what they prefer, split cost and match. So, it's great. It's an opportunity because the entire cost isn't on the agency. But the obstacle is that if it's a match, a reimbursement match, you do have to have that money upfront and then you're being reimbursed. Sometimes that can be an obstacle depending upon the size of your agency and then the wait time to get that reimbursement. We've had some funding that it can take two, three, four months to get the actual money in the office, once we bill them.

Music up to Jingle

Jasen: As the workshop continues, Lyndsie and Alex provide helpful tips for partnerships to consider at the formation stage as well as lessons learned.

Lyndsie: How do you get started? So, first part is defining your project and goals, right? If you already have a project that's going on, or that you're working on, or that you're already in execution phase, you've already got to start looking at what comes next. How do I find other opportunities, other funding that might align to what we are already working on?

Part of that is defining your project, defining your goal. Sometimes you do have to mix it up a little bit, add a couple extra elements, maybe take out a couple elements. But for the most part, the core of what you're doing should be sustainable. You should always have a sustainability plan that then you're able to utilize that into your next funding opportunity. Always think about

sustainability on the forefront so that way when you're looking for other funding. You already know where you should be looking next or already know what that narrative will look like.

Research funding sources. I will be again, very transparent. We in Omaha, Nebraska, have a very philanthropic community. You got the Buffetts of the world, you got the Logiers of the world. and they love higher education. They love K-12, and they love the community college system. Without their assistance and without having them at the table, I can honestly say there is a lot of funding that our community college system in Nebraska as a state would probably not get. They are 100% very philanthropic.

But on top of that, they also have requirements of what you need to do in order to receive their funding. So again, researching what funding opportunities, whether it be private or public, making sure they truly align. Also developing a plan. Again, our executive director, she's been doing this for a long, long time. She has this plan probably, that she can spit out in her sleep. Alex and I are still learning many of these ways of how to develop a plan, but we can honestly say that having that plan and having it on paper, that's the one thing that she has been awesome about, is this is what our plan is. This is what we're going to start looking for. She's looking three years in advance before a program ends on how do we start looking for other opportunities? Who's at that table? Who's already thinking that they might want to invest in what we're doing? So, part of that is developing that plan.

Collaboration. You never shut a door. You never shut a door. And because that collaboration is always somehow or another going to be beneficial to you in some way, in some shape or form. You can have good collaborators and you can have okay collaborators, right? Your great collaborators are the ones that you can always go to and say, Hey, letter of support, letter of support, letter of support. How would you like to benefit from this? How would you like to be incorporated? The ones that are not so great. That's okay too. But you always keep that relationship going because somehow or another you always collaborate. You collaborate with everybody in your community, keep those doors always open, which also goes down to communication and then monitoring data for compliance and reporting.

Again, when you're researching your other opportunities for your leverage funds, data, qualitative and quantitative, matter. And so, if you have a really robust program that you invested in that you're working on now, that data is going to be critical in your next applications or next

opportunities of seeking funds. They want to know what are your outcomes? How have you proved your outcomes? What are your numbers? I can tell you now, like at any point you should know your numbers. If you're at a conference and somebody like, Yeah, I would love to invest, but tell me your number. You should be able to spit your numbers out at any point. But you should also be able to put that on paper and put it in a qualitative and quantitative manner.

But then also when it comes to compliance, especially when you're working with federal or state entities, they're going to want to know what are your standardized operating procedures, what are your auditing procedures, what are you doing for monitoring? Having people at the table, that are part of your organization, can help you figure that out. You don't have to be the one that has to figure it out yourself. There are other people probably in your organization that probably are subject matter experts in this area that can significantly help you in making sure you have these standardized operating procedures for whatever application or whatever resources that you're applying.

Funds for, but then also having a way to evaluate and measure your impact, which also goes to goal alignment. One recommendation I will always put out there is have an internal evaluator, but then have an external evaluator. Have somebody that can look at it in a different lens and a different perspective. Your internal is going to be great because they know the institution or the organization you're working with. They can provide that context and that information. Your external is going to be able to be the one to be super transparent with you about what is working, what is not working, and then how do we fix this? And you know what, if it's not working, then how do we go back to the table? Your internal like I said, they're usually like, Hey, we're going to make this look wonderful and beautiful. My experience is my external is usually one that's super transparent. Like, let's look into this data a little bit more, but also your external evaluator is going to be great in longitudinal studies as well, so that person can be truly, truly awesome in helping set you up for what comes next after your funding or while you're mid funding, what can come next or what can you start looking for.

Alex: So, what we've learned along the way, you need grant writers and you need great grant writers and great grant managers. We can't do what we do without them. We all play a role in that. I can't tell you how many sets of eyes are on a grant before we even submit it with realistic goals. Yes, we want to go out there, and we want to save the world in poverty, and make sure everybody knows all the things they need to know and have all the skills required to go into their

dream career. But, we also have to be realistic with the grant, that we're looking at personnel. I think we've learned more is better. Always write more into the grant than may need because you might find out that you actually need it and have a contingency reserve date alignment with funding sources so that is when you're looking at, okay, this grant is ending. What's up next? Queuing up the next grant, making sure there's some overlap so you can onboard one while one is being off ported and then ask questions. I don't know of any philanthropic organization that isn't open to questions. Ask those. Think about data before you even start. Look at what you're going to need to measure. What are the outcomes you're saying that you are going to deliver and start measuring those. How can you easily measure it and easily communicate that.

Lyndsie: Can I add to that one? Yeah. And making sure you have a system that can track it and that you're not saying we're going to track this data but have no way of tracking it. Make sure you have a way to do that on the front end.

Alex: And then that last one is just seeking the mentorship and partnership. We all want to be better and grow better together, and there's no reason we can't collaborate to get that done.

Music up to Jingle

Lyndsie: How many people in this room when they were ten years old said, When I grow up, I want to be a grant manager?

[Audience laughter]

Lyndsie: Hey! Okay! Many of us do not grow up saying that this is the hand we want to be dealt, right? Many of us fall into this type of role for me, I needed hands on training, so I got paired up with our executive director. I remember my first grant I got it was about \$250,000 and the college was like, Oh, it's tiny, it's okay, and I'm over here. Like, that's a lot of money for somebody that has never managed a grant before. Great. But because she had the experience, she was able to mentor me through every single step of that. I learned about budget modifications, I learned about procurement, I learned about auditing and federal regulations like so much that I probably never would have known if I didn't have somebody that had already lived through that. On top of that, another thing I would highly recommend I went through and got my project management professional certification. Again, super critical in me understanding the whys behind why grant

management works the way it does. So anybody with any type of project management or formal training, I would highly recommend it in some shape or form. It definitely is enlightening. Alex, how about you?

Alex: Well, lucky for us, we work at Metro Community College and a lot of community colleges offer grant writing classes on both the credit and non-credit side. So I was lucky enough to attend some of those along with project management, with the mentorship and partnership. And we also have a non-profit of the Midlands agency that offers a weeklong grant writing bootcamp. So there's lots of resources out there.

[Music up]

Jasen: What a great ending to a powerful workshop at ACT's Workforce Summit in Nashville, featuring Lyndsie Gibbs and Alex Lovrien from Metropolitan Community College in Omaha. In our show notes for episode 46, we provide a link to the when and where for the next ACT Workforce Summit. You'll find links to connect and learn more about Metro Community College and the work ready community at Omaha.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!