



MORE THAN SKILLS

How Bridge Programs Can Support Adult Learners' Occupational Mobility

Mariela Cervantes¹ and her husband led a comfortable life in Mexico where they owned a farm and operated a storefront to sell what they grew. The Cervantes enjoyed their work and made enough money to provide for their family, which included two young sons. However, their confidence in their ability to continue to provide for their family, as well as their optimism for the future, began to decline early in 2002.

One night when closing their business to go home for the evening, Mariela and her husband had their lives threatened by an organized group of robbers who held them at gunpoint and demanded all the cash they had on hand. Although the Cervantes were not harmed physically, the encounter was emotionally scarring and left them traumatized. Their fears worsened after local law enforcement authorities failed to prevent such crimes from reoccurring. Mariela and her husband were held up again by another group of criminals a few months later. At this point, the Cervantes decided the conditions were not amenable to raising a family and opted to move to the United States with their two young boys.

Although the Cervantes were experienced businessowners, they soon discovered that the occupational landscape that awaited them in Illinois where they settled, would not allow them to

¹ This is a pseudonym given to protect the confidentiality of the respondent. Any resemblance to either the respondent or other persons is unintentional.



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immediately continue in their line of work. They found it unrealistic to establish their own business using their farming experience and quickly missed the economic autonomy and independence business ownership can provide. Mariela funneled her industriousness into her job search and began work in housekeeping, and her husband began work in construction. Mariela enrolled in adult education classes at various community colleges, but the competing demands of being a parent in a new country and working full time made it difficult for her to upskill and reclaim the earnings potential that she had as a business owner prior to immigrating to the United States.

As with most immigrant parents, Mariela put her career dreams on hold while her two young boys were in school. Because her primary focus was to support her family and ensure her children succeeded academically, she and her husband both invested their time working in jobs that allowed them to earn a livelihood, but which had limited growth potential.

Mariela worked in housekeeping at a skilled nursing facility. But not until she enrolled at the adult education program at Joliet Junior College years later and committed to completing her GED courses did she see a practical pathway for growing her career in the industry. Mariela finished the Phlebotomy Bridge program at the college and credits it for many of her successes. The dedicated and supportive staff at the college helped Mariela secure her first phlebotomy job. The staff also helped to restore confidence in Mariela's ability to grow her career and her general optimism to set and achieve more ambitious goals.

When asked to reflect on the value of the Phlebotomy Bridge Program, Mariela praised the program for building her self-esteem:



I think the confidence. . . . [My instructor] said, you have to be confident and trust yourself. When you go to an interview, you have to trust yourself. . . . show the person, even though you don't have any experience, that you're gonna put the best of you because finishing this bridge program, it tells about who you really are, because not everybody can start a program and then complete it with all the difficulties that you had, because first is the language and second . . . in my case, I'm an older person. It sometimes is harder to learn. . . . It was hard at the beginning. . . . I had to learn how to learn . . . so I think, definitely just to believe in myself and make sure I feel confident when I go to the interview."

Mariela accepted an offer of employment as a phlebotomist in March 2024. She is currently completing a Certified Patient Care Technician program at Joliet Junior College with hopes of pursuing more career opportunities.



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