Dear Friends,

It is always meaningful to reflect as we close out a program cycle and look toward the next, but this year it is especially gratifying. Despite the extreme challenges presented, Bridges had a strong year.

We anticipated a drop in numbers as we transitioned to remote counseling, but our client load held steady and the students who we worked with persevered through a school year that was unlike any other. The number of Bridges’ clients, counseling sessions, and presentations all increased from the previous program year. We also facilitated more workshops and presentations in an effort to offset our ability to have an in-person school presence and worked with more underclassmen and current college students than usual.

But these successes did not come without loss. Even with expanded outreach, we are acutely aware that we missed working with many students who were struggling just to make it through day to day, who did not have the bandwidth to explore curiosities about pursuing vocational training and college. We hope to still identify and support many of these students as we all regain our footing. While we were so grateful to lean on remote counseling and presentations, we are eager to resume in-person counseling when it is safe to do so.

We are concerned about nationwide postsecondary program enrollment declines. These declines are particularly sharp among first-generation students and students from underrepresented groups, raising critical concerns about exacerbated inequities in the coming years. Bridges is ready to tackle what lies ahead, to reaffirm and reestablish partnerships that will allow us to collaboratively and strategically support our community when post-pandemic life begins to take shape and we continue to collectively recalibrate.

With gratitude,

Joleen & Anne
Bridges' mission is to increase access to postsecondary options for people of all ages, especially those who are among the first generation in their families to pursue certificates, vocational training and two-year and four-year degrees.

Rebeca Romero Rainey and Pam Shepherd founded Bridges Project for Education in 1997 in response to the low number of college graduates and the lack of existing supports to help people access postsecondary education in Taos County.

The majority of Bridges' clients are high school students. We also serve a significant number of nontraditional students—those new to college or returning after a hiatus. Youth pursuing their high school equivalency, incarcerated students, and pregnant and parenting youth are among Bridges' clients, too. In 23 years we've served over 3,000 students of all ages.

**BRIDGES PROJECT FAST FACTS**

*August 2020 - July 2021*

- **118** clients counseled
- **590** individual counseling sessions
- **5** average number of sessions per client
- **179** COLLEGE CONNECTIONS students
- **23** community presentations/workshops
- **9** Learning Curve editions published in Taos News
- **1** Enchanted Circle Corp-AmeriCorp Member
- **2** Counselors/Staff
- **$155,010** 2020-2021 Budget
Postsecondary access is a community issue, Bridges knows. Inequality hurts us all. And so we take steps to level the playing field by demystifying the process, identifying resources, sharing information, and helping students find their way forward in education and life.
The returns for those with a postsecondary education are profound.

Workplace skills and job opportunities, increased income, health advantages, community engagement via voting and volunteering, and self-assessed happiness are all benefits.

When individuals succeed, our community thrives.

**EARLY ENGAGEMENT**

**COLLEGE CONNECTIONS**

Research shows the critical importance of an early start in preparing youth for postsecondary options. While Bridges has always included outreach to younger students, the Taos High School Class of 2021 was the first cohort to take part in College Connections (CC), a new Bridges program supporting students from eighth grade through their senior year.

Our experience with individualized counseling emphasized the need to work with younger students. We saw the heartbreak when clients discovered their ineligibility for the schools of their choice, due to a lack of adequate preparation. We want students to make informed choices, have access to the broadest options available and build relationships with them to optimize our counseling services.

Bridges completed the 5th and final year of College Connections. Through this pilot program, we worked with Taos High School’s Class of 2021. We presented a progressive curriculum designed to help students understand postsecondary options and the steps associated with reaching their goals. In the coming program year Bridges is reviewing collected data to identify what worked well and what needs to be adapted and improved. One thing is certain, we recognize early engagement is the key to our students’ success. Bridges will continue programming for younger students using what we’ve learned from the College Connections.
Bridges worked with external evaluator i2i to track program progress and results. We wanted to ensure that CC increased postsecondary readiness and aided students in the pursuit of educational goals. A static pre-survey was administered each year to identify shifts in student perceptions from year to year. The post-survey changed each year to measure students’ knowledge and retention of content delivered. The flanking classes were surveyed to analyze attitudinal and perceptual variances between our pilot cohort and those not receiving curriculum.

As the program progressed we witnessed an increased understanding of postsecondary options and knowledge of available degrees and certificates, different types of schools, and the basics of admissions requirements. More specifically, students were understanding the link between how high school choices impact future options. Our continued presence with students appeared to bolster trust and increase their knowledge about and excitement for pursuing postsecondary education. We saw students beginning to imagine themselves in a postsecondary program. Furthermore, they see themselves in a postsecondary environment that complemented their interests, need and preferences.

The following charts demonstrate the shifts of the cohort in grades 9, 10 and 11.
"My appointments at Bridges helped me stay organized and complete applications early and not at the last minute. I got help with writing and revising my scholarship essays which was a fun process! They helped me to not feel so overwhelmed."

Michelle Montez
College Connections Cohort
Taos High School
Class of 2021
Lack of information and advising around the admissions and financial aid process creates a significant barrier for minority, low income and first generation students to enter college or vocational school.

The New Mexico Kids Count Data indicates only 17% of Taos County adults possess a Bachelor's degree. Parents may find it difficult to guide their own children toward this unfamiliar experience. Bridges' welcomes clients of all ages and backgrounds, but we focus on helping underrepresented students. These students are two thirds less likely to pursue postsecondary education than their equally qualified peers. This can have far-reaching effects for the workforce in economically challenged areas like ours and contribute to a disparity between social groups that serves no one.

**INDIVIDUALIZED COUNSELING**

Clients are referred to Bridges by alumni, school staff and community agencies. They also learn about our services through presentations and events. Students do not need a referral to make an appointment. They often know of Bridges from immediate or extended family who have utilized our services.

Individualized admissions and financial aid counseling is the heart of our work as it addresses the unique needs of our clients. We help students identify goals and plot a course of action. Students are supported as they complete applications, write essays and develop resumes, apply for financial aid and local, regional and national scholarships, and compare financial aid awards. The average student meets with us five times in a school year.

School closures due to COVID-19 made it even more challenging to reach the most vulnerable students. To this end, we worked closely with the senior counselor at Taos High School to co-manage outreach and counseling. Bridges counselors maintained a normal case load, while stretching to find new and effective ways to ensure that we reached all seniors through presentations to advisory and AVID classes, through multiple rounds of personal emails, phone calls and texts, and topical workshops.

Every senior received communications with information about Bridges and a general checklist of admissions and financial aid steps. We continued to work with guidance counselors and teachers at other area high schools and presented to their students. Bridges also presented virtual workshops and alumni panels which were open to all community members.
2020-2021 Client Profile

Most 2020-2021 Bridges Clients were High School Students

- Seniors: 54
- Other High School Students: 39
- Current College Students: 19
- Nontraditional or HSE/GED Students: 6

2020-2021 Clients

- Arab, Middle Eastern: 2
- African American: 2
- Asian American: 3
- Native American: 7
- White: 49
- Hispanic: 55
Pell Grants are limited to students with financial need and awarded by the Federal Student Grants Program. In Taos County 81% of students qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch.* Federal Pell Grant awards can reach up to $6,345. Amounts can change yearly.

*Annie E. Casey, NM Kids Count Data 2018

First Generation students are the first in their immediate family to pursue a bachelor’s degree. In Taos County 17% of residents hold a bachelors degree.*

Ultimately, the term “first-generation” implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college. While first generation students are often quite academically skilled and contribute in many ways to a campus community, navigating the tangled web of college policies, procedures, jargon, and expectations can be a challenge. This pervasive “hidden curriculum” can damage the confidence of first-generation students, lead to struggles in belonging, and result in departure.*

These issues are equally, if not more relevant in the application and financial aid process that enables First Generation students to make their way to college.

*Annie E. Casey, NM Kids Count Data 2018
**Center for First Generation Success
working with Bridges was like having architects of the process. They laid out a plan, and they helped us to continue along the way that we wanted our son to go to college.
Each student works individually with a Bridges counselor to chart the most beneficial path forward.

And while Bridges is justly proud of students who've gained admittance to places like Georgetown and Duke, Harvard and Stanford and MIT, they're just as proud of the students they've helped acquire the skills and training to become chefs, medical technicians, machinists and dental assistants.
ALUMNI SUPPORT

Getting students to enroll in a postsecondary program is only meaningful if they’re able to graduate. New Mexico institutions rank 42nd and 48th in two-and four-year degree completion, leaving many students with sizable debt but no degree. Studies show that first generation, minority and Pell eligible college students are less likely than their peers to graduate in four years or to graduate at all. To counteract low completion rates, Bridges’ Alumni Support Program connects with alumni during their postsecondary program to support their matriculation. Through welfare check-ins during students’ first year, we provide support and encouragement and connect them with resources available at their institution. In addition to the support for students, families are supported on the journey as well. Postsecondary degree and program completion rates are positively increased by consistent support from home, enrolling within 12 months of high school graduation and successful completion of the first year. For these reasons, we verify enrollment, first semester completion, provide support during second semester midterms, and confirm program completion.

Alumni support and outreach efforts continued with an emphasis on the class of 2020 as these students faced unprecedented complications and barriers on their postsecondary journey. Through alumni outreach, Bridges is alerted to any necessary organizational supports to be provided outside of individual counseling. Bridges continues to assist families with a wide range of tasks and issues: FAFSA support and submission; navigating educational systems; pursuing scholarship opportunities; and evaluating school transfers.

“Bridges was a safe place for me to dream. I didn’t understand what opportunities, places, and dreams were beyond and Bridges introduced me to a bigger picture and a wider educational landscape to travel.”

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Learning Curve
Monthly column in The Taos News, written by Bridges Staff

School Presentations
Bridges staff presents college admissions and financial aid process overview to juniors at area high schools.

Community Presentations
Tailor made college admissions and financial aid process overview delivered to community partners and agencies by Bridges Staff

Website
A clearinghouse of useful resources for students, families, educators and community partners

Taos Alumni Network Collaboration
Hosted web panels on Women in STEM and Liberal Arts Colleges
“Bridges helped me find a lot of opportunities and then follow-through on those opportunities. I got help applying to scholarships. Also, the support with essay writing was extremely helpful and helped me to a better writer.”

Max Meadowcroft
College Connections Cohort
Taos High School
Class of 2021
INDIVIDUALS
Dr. Charles Anderson
Anonymous
Nina Anthony
Barbara Arnold
Dr. Gary Atlas
Gina Azzari
Sharon & Bob Barton
Peg Bartlett-Wynward
& Todd Wynward
Jamie Bauer
Tom Baumgartel
Liana & Ezra Bayles
Larry Bell
Karen & Ken Bergren
Susan Berman
Lauren & Per Bjorkman
Adriana Blake & Keir Green
Tom Blankenhorn
Janara Bornstein
Pam & Jackson Boyd
Molly & Gillette Burns
Lisa & John Cancro
Marsha Carlson
Paula Claycomb
Roy & Janis Coffee
Katherine Coleman
Alexandra & Oliver Collignon
Rick Collignon
Romy & Carl Colonus
Andrea & Bob Corroon
Amber Coss
Elizabeth Crittenden Palacios
& Oscar Palacios
Carol & Robert Cudd
Pam & Bill DeBoer
Dora & Carl Dillistone
Vanessa & Ted Dimond
Del Endres
Rose Gordon
Linda Fair
Carol & David Farmer
Kiersten Figurski
Felicity Fonseca
Barbara & Ian Forsberg
Hank Friedman
Peter French
Kevin Fuller
Ken Gallard
Maria T. Garcia
Aurora Garver
Paige Gerling
Terry & Lynn Gillam
Gwenneth & Jim Glenn
Matty & Dan Goldberg
Sue Goldberg & Ray Laufer
Naomi Goldblum
Whitney Goler
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Sara Jean & Gene Gray
Lucile Leigh Grieder
Guercini Family
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Peggy & John Hamilton
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Gael Minton
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& Chris Romero
Berlinda & Joe Montoya
Nancy & Richard Montoya
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Sawnie Morris & Brian Shields
Linda Moscarella
Bette Myerson
Kandace & Gunther Nachtrab
Stephen Natelson
Rob Nightingale
Lisa & Patrick O’Brien
Connie Ode
Patricia & Steve Okamoto
Catherine Oliver
Christy & Ron Olsen
Carol Ortega
Kristina Ortez
Jane & Dick Padberg
Happy Price
Jackson Price
Joy & Frank Purcell
Stacey A. Quinn
Polly Raye and Bill Christmas
Margery Reading
Robert Reid
Jean Richards
Althea Ricketts
Chris & Stanley Riveles
Howie Roemer
Tom Rogers
Kym and Eliu Romero
Rebecca Romero Rainey
& John Rainey
Victoria & Ruben E. Romo
Brandon Rose
Steve Rose
Jeannie Ross
Nikki Ross & Jake Caldwell
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Santana Rael

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The Burns Group-Baird Private Wealth Management
Centinel Bank
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Taos Dental Group, Justin Nylund
Taos Lifestyle
Taos News
Taos Properties
Taos Veterinary Clinic
The Schantz Company, Inc.
Three Designing Women
Up Front Construction, Inc.
New this year

Agency Endowment Fund
at Taos Community Foundation

Agency endowment funds offer nonprofits a predictable, stable source of income for their mission. They also offer donors a permanent alternative to annual giving. There are so many ways to give through Bridges’ Agency Endowment Fund at Taos Community Foundation—Stocks, IRAs, Transfers; Planned Gifts; Specific Dollar Amounts/Personal Property; Specific Real Estate; Percentage of an Estate; and other gift options.

Find out more at Taos Community Foundation.
“Bridges made the path to college less intimidating and helped me find my voice and confidence to go for a degree.”

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