

Hard Differentiators: Bridges Community of Practice Model

These tables explain some of the things—the hard differentiators—that make the Bridges Out of Poverty model stand out from other groups and organizations that address poverty and community sustainability.

Hard Differentiator	Explanation
We use the lens of economic class to address poverty.	There are other lenses that we recognize: race, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, and sexual identity. While we acknowledge/honor all lenses, our contribution to discussions on poverty is primarily the lens of economic class.
We define poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources.”	This gives us something to do about poverty—namely, build resources/assets.
We engage and learn from people in poverty.	People who are living in poverty give us concrete, local information about poverty. They provide us with an accurate mental model of poverty. Without this local mental model of poverty, planners (who are usually from middle class) operate according to their own perception of what poverty is in the community.
We engage people in poverty as problem solvers; they are at the planning and decision making tables.	Typically people in poverty are invisible, absent from the decision making process. The middle class and upper class make plans and decisions about and for people in poverty. In Bridges, everything is based on the premise that people in poverty are problem solvers and need to be at the planning and decision making table.
We have a comprehensive approach; we address all causes of poverty; we prevent and alleviate suffering, support transition out of poverty, and work to eliminate poverty; we cover all stages of life with the Bridges Continuum.	Typically, planners have a favorite and narrow view of the causes of poverty and plan accordingly.
We recognize the impact that income and wealth disparity has on individuals and communities.	Individuals and communities suffer when people live in unstable environments. The individual loses a job because of the lack of resources; the business owner has higher turnover costs; the community neighborhoods decline.
We help people understand their own economic and societal experiences in order to help them obtain a better understanding of those in other economic classes.	Typically the person from middle class learns about people from poverty so he or she can help them improve their circumstances. This usually is accomplished through the expectation that the person in poverty will change his or her thinking or attitude. In our work, the change in thinking and attitude must take place in people from all classes.
We use the hidden rules of class to bring people together across class lines to solve community problems.	We raise class issues in order to help people make relationships of mutual respect across class lines, as a way of solving problems. This isn't about class warfare.
We promote sustainable communities where everyone can live well.	Often communities define themselves in such a way as to leave out people in poverty and to award a sustainable life to one's own circle or class.
We engage people from all classes, races, sectors, and political persuasions.	We have the tools to attract these people and bring them together to work for the good of all.

Hard Differentiators About Bridges Structures and Operations	
Hard Differentiator	Explanation
Bridges is a set of concepts, strategies, and tools, as well as a language or lexicon; it is not a program.	People, organizations, and communities use Bridges to make their programs better, to get better outcomes.
Bridges operates under the principles of attraction and ownership.	Those who are attracted to Bridges are encouraged to take ownership of the ideas and apply them in their own organizations and community.
Bridges operates above the “silos”/departmental thinking.	Organizations can use Bridges to improve their outcomes, but when people come to Bridges Steering Committees, they leave their silos at the door and focus on how to help people make the transition out of poverty.
Bridges is applied locally according to the history, leadership, best practices, and unique characteristics of the organization and community.	Bridges recommends principles but doesn’t impose programs and strategies; it isn’t “one size fits all.”
Bridges is an evolving community of practice where organizations and communities share knowledge with each other at the local, sector, national, and international levels.	Bridges encourages innovation.
Bridges is a form of participatory action research.	The participants review their work and adapt and improve their models accordingly.
Bridges is a form of participatory democracy.	Communities come together to solve problems; they don’t necessarily wait for the “authority” to act.
Bridges helps develop sophisticated service delivery systems.	Communities that embrace Bridges can reorganize to focus on helping people get out of poverty.
Bridges is a community engagement model.	Bridges helps design pathways to economic self-sufficiency and well-rounded lives by engaging the business, educational, civic, and faith sectors.

Hard Differentiators Found in <i>Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World (GA)</i> and <i>Investigations into Economic Class in America (IECA)</i>	
<i>GA and IECA are workbooks that community members and college students from poverty use to investigate the impact of poverty on themselves and their communities. GA and IECA are done in groups. There are 15 two-hour sessions with a trained facilitator.</i>	
Hard Differentiator	Explanation
People in GA and IECA are “investigators.”	They are not students, participants, or members; they are not taught or told or forced to change or comply. They investigate their world and make informed decisions about the results of their investigation.
Investigators inform and add knowledge.	While many take an active role during GA and IECA sessions, some investigators might be passive learners. Both types of investigators can be beneficial to the sessions.
GA and IECA address relevant economic class issues and use life itself as the context for education.	Economic class issues are seldom talked about in any detail in other programs serving first-generation, low-income students—and the genius of the GA and IECA approach is that life itself informs the educational

	process rather than education simply preparing one for life. To be sure, though, academic and research constructs also are integral aspects of GA and IECA.
GA and IECA put the investigator in charge of his or her own learning.	This is different from the “righting reflex” of many middle class individuals and organizations that try to quickly change things or fix things (make them “right”) for people in poverty.
Investigators deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.	Many programs teach the “logic of the system” and attempt to bring people into conformity to the system. The goal of GA and IECA is not to make people compliant workers, employees, or students; it is to give them tools to think through and create what works for them.
GA and IECA work because of sequencing/reinforcement and deepening of learning in an agenda-free, safe, and neutral environment.	Typically organizations teach by telling and providing “the” answers. Instead, GA and IECA provide the opportunity for the investigator to learn what will work best for himself/herself.
GA and IECA reveal the theories of change upon which the work is based.	Typically clients, students, and customers are not exposed to the theory behind the change or learning process. They are simply told what to do.
GA and IECA help investigators create a new future story.	Our work is about changing lives, not just learning new subject matter.