



BENDABLE LIFELONG LEARNING SYSTEM

Developmental Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

Prepared by FSG
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Executive Summary

What is Bendable?

Bendable is a community-based **lifelong learning system** providing all residents with access to learning in order to create more resilient individuals, economies, and communities. The platform is a learning market place featuring a wide database of over 1,500 resources to learn online and a curated set of learning opportunities, enhancing users' knowledge and skills as well as community connections. Launched in South Bend, Indiana in June 2020 as a platform designed "for and by the people of South Bend," Bendable is stewarded by the St. Joseph County Public Library and supported by the Hub (also known as the Drucker Institute team).

Bendable is grounded in an underlying philosophy: that **providing equal access to learning opportunities and learner support** for personal and job-related growth will **enhance the resiliency** of all who use it and **will lead to equitable outcomes**. Driven by the belief that lifelong learning happens at multiple levels, the initiative aims to provide learning content that is relevant and trustworthy, and to catalyze change and learning with individuals as well as within organizations (e.g., employers, community organizations). The Hub and Library recognize that access to learning is not sufficient for learning to occur, and aims to support and foster a habit of learning across the community. By building users' individual resiliency, relationships with one another, and involving employers, Bendable will contribute to economic and community resiliency across South Bend.

"Bendable isn't going to solve poverty. It isn't going to solve structural racism. It isn't going to solve anything in one fell swoop. But, it can be a part of a powerful set of solutions that communities need to try, and provide easy and almost radical access to resources."

- Rick Wartzman, Drucker Institute, "[How Community Plays a Critical Role in Fostering Lifelong Learning](#)" (*Forbes*, September 2020)

What was the focus of the developmental evaluation?

From December 2019 to December 31, 2020, the Lumina Foundation commissioned FSG to conduct a developmental evaluation of Bendable. FSG served as the evaluation and learning partner, supporting the Hub's decision-making, strategy, and early operations, both pre- and post-launch. In addition, FSG captured findings and lessons from this evaluation to guide and inform expansion of the lifelong learning platform to other geographies.

The developmental evaluation was guided by a set of questions that were developed with input from the Hub team:

1. How, to what extent, and why are South Bend residents **accessing and engaging** with Bendable - and who is doing so?

2. What learning **opportunities and content** are available through Bendable, and how are they meeting residents’ learning needs?
3. How, to what extent, and why is the Hub adapting its **approach** in light of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis?
4. To what extent is Bendable helping residents, organizations, and employers in South Bend build **relationships and connections** with one another? To what extent is this contributing to a strengthened sense of community?
5. How and to what extent is the physical and digital **infrastructure and operations** of Bendable adapting to meet residents’ needs?
6. What about the Bendable experience in South Bend can inform **replication and scale efforts**?

This report reflects the findings based on the data the evaluation team was able to collect to answer these learning questions.

What are we learning about Bendable’s early implementation?

Analytics from the first six months since Bendable’s launch indicate that **Bendable has been successful in its launch and early implementation in reaching and engaging people in South Bend.** User engagement metrics show that Bendable continues to have a steady stream of visitors and account sign-ups from the Greater South Bend area, particularly among geographies that are predominantly made up of communities of color. Bendable is also being embedded in local organizations (e.g., Beacon Health System, City of South Bend Public Works, Goodwill), reflecting the platform’s integration into the local community.

Figure A. Summary of Bendable visitors as of December 4, 2020



It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially impacted the original launch and implementation plans for Bendable, limiting the platform’s in-person engagement that was considered

critical for building uptake and engagement. In spite of the pandemic, the Hub and Library have been successful in the platform's launch and early implementation. They adapted, implementing Bendable in an almost exclusively virtual environment, and seeking out opportunities to meet residents and partners where they were.

Several key factors are driving Bendable's early success:

1. **Community buy-in**: The Hub has established strong relationships that have been central to building trust and engagement with Bendable. The Hub intentionally invested staff resources to support building community buy-in, and the continuous flow of information to and from community members has ensured that Bendable continues to be designed and implemented for and by the people of South Bend. In addition, the Hub has learned to balance speed and efficiency in design and implementation with the time and space necessary to gather and incorporate feedback, including considering partner priorities and equity implications.
2. **Marketing and outreach**: The Hub and Library have effectively adapted marketing and outreach efforts to the uncertain and dynamic context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Bendable has succeeded in reaching and engaging people in South Bend during the first six months since launch. However, while residents are hearing about Bendable, there are differing and additional notions of what Bendable is and could be, which need to be clarified moving forward. In addition, accessibility continues to be a challenge that outreach efforts alone cannot solve.
3. **Community engagement**: The Hub and Library made specific efforts to reach underserved populations – particularly communities of color and low-income communities. In addition, as the platform has been implemented, the Hub and Library have increasingly focused on partner organizations as the key strategy for building and scaling user engagement and depth of learning.
4. **User experience**: Designing and adapting Bendable to reflect the community's makeup, interest, and needs increases the likelihood that users will engage with the content and return to the platform. However, building and sustaining user engagement takes time. It is still early in Bendable's implementation, and the current pandemic context has unexpectedly limited awareness and in-person engagement.
5. **Hub**: The Hub team's structure and culture have been central to Bendable's implementation and success in advancing use of the platform. For the Hub, this has manifested in an intentionality to be inclusive, responsive, and adaptive in Bendable's design and implementation.
6. **Library**: In addition, the Library has assumed the role of the core owner and implementer of Bendable, which is more likely to support Bendable's sustainability and ability to achieve its goals. Together, The Library and Hub have effectively worked through challenges related to workstyle, pace, and expectations.

What implications can we draw from our learnings for scaling lifelong learning systems both in South Bend and in other geographies?

Based on suggestions from key Bendable stakeholders (e.g., Hub, Library, external partners, community stakeholders) as well as other implications based on the evaluation findings, the Hub can reflect on several **considerations for its activities in South Bend** moving forward:

1. Maintain and build additional **feedback loops** with community members and organizations.
2. Continue to **evolve the content and design** of the Bendable platform.
3. Clarify – and potentially simplify – Bendable’s **value proposition**.
4. Continue to **adapt marketing and outreach** strategies to meet the needs of specific communities.
5. Continue to apply a **targeted universalism** approach more consistently and intentionally in order to reach and engage residents who face disproportionate barriers.
6. Stay actively accountable to the principles and considerations in the **equity guide**.¹
7. Stay in close dialogue on and continue to evolve the **transition plan** for the Hub and the Library.
8. Continue to embed **evaluation and learning practices** in the Hub’s activities.

In addition, the developmental evaluation identified several principles of practice as the essential ingredients for success in implementing and scaling a lifelong learning system in other geographies:

1. Actively **engage residents** to ensure the lifelong learning system **reflects the needs, interests, and makeup of the community**.
2. Understand the **historical, social, political, and economic context** of each geography.
3. Allow **substantial lead-time for building trusting relationships** with city and community organizations, and residents.
4. **Tailor** outreach, engagement, and marketing strategies.
5. Commit to continuously thinking about **inclusion**.
6. Learn and fail fast, but also build in time to **pause and reflect**.
7. Maintain a team culture of strong **trust and mutual respect**, grounded in a shared vision.
8. Engage with **authenticity and humility** with the community.
9. Support **ongoing evaluation and learning** to capture and share learnings within the team, with key stakeholders, and with funders.

¹ The equity guide is a document titled “Equity Principles & Practices for Scaling Bendable” created by FSG to support the Hub’s ongoing learning and awareness-building related to equity.



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