

NACUFS (2026)

Employee Development Program of the Year

Zeinab Mroue + Rob Trufant



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Entry details

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Institution Name:	Michigan State University
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Introduction:

Bridges is Michigan State University Culinary Services' paid, on-the-clock English tutoring program that removes logistical and financial barriers to learning by compensating both learners and tutors, embedding one-on-one instruction directly into the workday, and measuring progress with assessments. Developed through a collaboration with James Madison College and the Lansing Refugee Development Center (RDC), Bridges turns everyday foodservice into a platform for language growth, confidence, and career mobility.

Essay:

Bridges launched in 2022 after Culinary Services identified a cohort of team members whose limited English proficiency hindered training, communication, and advancement. While community classes existed, they were often unreachable due to work schedules, family responsibilities, cost, and transportation. To remove those frictions, the program was designed around paid, individualized tutoring delivered on site and on schedule, so learning is integrated into work, with the clear promise from the first interview: "We provide English learning." The structure centers on one on one and small group sessions between trained MSU student tutors and Culinary Services employees, held weekly in dining facilities. Instruction is tailored to each learner's level and role – covering practical English such as food safety vocabulary, communicating with supervisors, and interacting with guests. Progress is

measured through pre and post assessments administered in partnership with RDC, and celebrated at graduation ceremonies that publicly recognize growth. In 2025, Bridges expanded from Case to the Brody Neighborhood, doubling participation; the waiting list has since tripled, reflecting trust and demand. Outcomes demonstrate the approach works, with gains in listening and reading, strong completion rates, and improved reliability, teamwork, empathy, leadership, and cultural competence across campus roles.

Introduction:

Retention improves when employees feel seen, supported, and able to contribute fully. Bridges drives that connection by transforming English learning from a personal hurdle into an institutional commitment – paid time, personalized instruction, celebratory milestones – so team members build confidence and a future with MSU Culinary Services.

Essay:

From the outset, Bridges was designed to keep great people. By compensating learners and tutors, the program signals that professional growth is part of the job, not an after-hours burden. Learners describe feeling “part of the team” for the first time, empowered to ask clarifying questions, understand expectations, and engage in pre shift communication. Supervisors report participants become more reliable, proactive, and collaborative – behaviors that stabilize schedules, reduce rework, and improve day to day operations – all known retention drivers. Retention impact is visible in participation patterns and post program sentiment. Over 90% of learners complete Bridges and receive a graduation certificate, and 98% report greater confidence using English at work. In check ins, employees highlight moments – communicating a guest request, clarifying a temp log step, or explaining a process – that used to feel out of reach. That shift in self-efficacy shows up in attendance, engagement, and willingness to take on new tasks. The program’s growth is itself a retention indicator, with a tripled waiting list reflecting credibility and value. By addressing miscommunications, anxiety, and language barriers, Bridges improves both employee experience and unit performance, while recognition and relationships foster belonging.

Introduction:

Bridges is a differentiator at the very first touchpoint: “We provide English learning.” That promise both widens the talent pool and reassures candidates who might otherwise self-select out of foodservice roles. By offering paid, one-on-one instruction and clear advancement pathways, Culinary Services recruits mission-aligned employees and student tutors who are eager to grow.

Essay:

Recruitment messaging integrates Bridges as a signature benefit, highlighted during interviews and onboarding. For prospective employees whose first language is not English, this reframes a perceived barrier into an employer sponsored opportunity, making MSU an attractive place to work. Because tutoring occurs on paid time and on site, candidates can envision participation without adding commutes or losing wages, removing common deterrents. The program also strengthens academic partnerships. Tutors are recruited from James Madison College and the RDC network, drawing students interested in education, public service, and intercultural engagement. This pipeline attracts high caliber student employees who bring service skills and a growth mindset. Tutors report that Bridges develops empathy, leadership, and communication – benefits that spill over into front of house and back of house roles, enhancing the candidate value proposition for student staff. A tangible expression of recruitment impact came in 2025, when the RDC partnership enabled a mini career fair tailored for refugee and immigrant students: nearly 40 attended, and 30 applied for dining positions, many citing Bridges as the reason they felt confident pursuing campus employment. The program’s reputation drives steady inbound interest, and the waiting list serves as both retention signal and recruitment magnet.

Introduction:

Satisfaction rises when the workplace makes growth possible and visible. Bridges builds that experience through individualized instruction, measurable progress, and public recognition – so team members not only gain language skills, but they also gain voice, agency, and belonging.

Essay:

Learners describe a before and after that is simple and profound: "Before, I only smiled – now I can speak." The program's one-on-one design creates psychological safety for practice, mistakes, and questions, while its job specific curriculum turns language learning into wins – clarifying a prep instruction, confirming a sanitation step, or helping a guest. Post program interviews show 98% of learners feel more confident using English at work, and over 90% feel more respected and included in their workplace community. Bridges also invests in celebration. Graduation ceremonies with certificates and leadership recognition reinforce that professional development is valued at every level. These rituals, paired with tutor check-ins and supervisor encouragement, cultivate a shared culture of progress. The result is visible in everyday interactions: more questions asked, more ideas volunteered, and more cross-cultural rapport between employees, students, supervisors, and guests. Supervisors note improved reliability and teamwork among participants, signaling that satisfaction is translating into stronger operations. For tutors, satisfaction comes from meaningful impact and growth, with increases in empathy, intercultural communication, and leadership, often cited as a highlight of their MSU experience.

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