

Learning Report of Bard Associates Program



Pete Mauney

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- Darren Walker, President, Ford Foundation
- Kamilah Duggins, Global Director, Talent Acquisition
- William Kelley, Former Global Director, Talent Acquisition and Engagement

Bard Associate Managers:

- Stefanie Barton
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- Charlene Caronan
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Foreword, by Darren Walker

In 2015, I had the opportunity to visit the New York Eastern Correctional Facility to witness the transformative work of the Bard Prison Initiative, a Ford Foundation grantee. During the visit, Alelur “Alex” Duran, a Bard student who was incarcerated at the time, asked me a question that struck me: would I consider hiring formerly incarcerated individuals at the Ford Foundation?

Frankly, at that time, the Ford Foundation hadn’t yet fully considered the profound ways we could support individuals reentering society after incarceration. Alex’s question served as a powerful reminder, urging me to internalize the principles we championed and to honestly evaluate if the Ford Foundation was doing all that it could. I knew then—with absolute certainty—that we had a responsibility to act. As I left the facility, I immediately called the foundation’s People and Culture team, urging them to begin developing a fellowship program; one that was designed to offer these talented individuals a genuine opportunity to gain meaningful professional experience.

That urgency and commitment resulted in the Bard Associates Program, or BAP. This initiative was conceived not as a superficial gesture, but as a deeply intentional effort to cultivate skills, talents, and passions of the people in the program—empowering them to thrive professionally and personally. We aimed to move beyond tokenizing inclusion to instead build a model of genuine, substantive inclusion. To achieve this, the program centered on the individuals in the program, prioritizing their needs and ensuring they received the most valuable resources for their career and personal development.

Consequently, BAP was envisioned with three primary goals. First and foremost, it was created to help BPI graduates enter the professional workforce in a supportive and nourishing environment—one that fostered their personal and professional ambitions. Secondly, the program was intended as a powerful signal to other employers, and to society at large, that justice-involved individuals are motivated, capable, and eager to contribute meaningfully to the workforce and emerge as future leaders. Finally, BAP also served as a way for the foundation to influence the broader field, demonstrating through a program grounded in genuine inclusion that improved reintegration efforts could indeed decrease recidivism and increase the chances of a successful return home.

As Max Kenner, the visionary founder and executive director of the Bard Prison Initiative, so eloquently put it, this program embodies a type of inclusion that is neither condescending nor prescriptive. Ford is a space where individuals are not defined or limited by their past, nor relegated to menial tasks. Having witnessed the remarkable intellect and drive of the Bard students,

my goal was to create opportunities that recognized their unique strengths and I wanted to offer them opportunities based on their unique strengths and aspirations—recognizing their potential rather than tokenizing their lived experiences.

Systemically, this program was also strategically designed to send a clear message to other employers and foundations. We wanted to demonstrate unequivocally that individuals who were formerly incarcerated are not only capable of excelling in professional environments, but that they deserve a real chance—an opportunity that transcends superficial diversity initiatives. Therefore, a core tenet of this program was to actively minimize employment discrimination, for those directly in the program, as well as other justice-involved individuals seeking to rebuild their lives.

The hypothesis that began to form in my mind after leaving Eastern Correctional Facility was one I felt compelled to explore with my colleagues at the foundation. It was this: if we provide genuine reintegration pathways through meaningful employment, a living wage, and stability, we would significantly increase the likelihood of a successful return home. While the Ford Foundation was already investing in reintegration efforts, such as the Justice and Mobility Fund, we lacked a tangible example within our own walls to truly validate this belief.

Under the guidance of Kamilah Duggins and William Kelley, our global directors on Ford Foundation's People and Culture team, the Bard Associates Program was launched at the foundation in 2016. Since its inception, it has been a marvelous success, offering truly life-changing opportunities to the fellows who have been a part of it. This one program, while undoubtedly a source of immense pride, is not enough. We at the Ford Foundation believe in the power of collaboration and shared purpose. We strongly encourage our colleagues in the philanthropic community to explore and adopt similar initiatives. By creating pathways for individuals with diverse lived experiences, including those who have been formerly incarcerated, we can collectively foster a more just and equitable society. We must all consider how we are envisioning a world where one's past does not dictate their future. Everyone deserves to reach their full potential and chart their own path. The Bard Associates Program embodies this belief, and it underscores the urgent need for all of us to consider

how we can expand opportunities for people with lived experiences different from our own. For our world to truly thrive, we must ensure that everyone has dignity and the ability to flourish.



Bard Prison Initiative

Purpose/ Introduction

The Bard Associates Program is a full-time fellowship opportunity for alumni of the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) to work at the Ford Foundation for two years (formerly one year). The program's objective is to provide individuals who were formerly incarcerated with professional development opportunities and exposure to a variety of career paths, and to engage them in substantive work projects that will prepare them for entry level or higher roles outside of the foundation. In collaboration with the BPI and field experts, the program was designed to offer associates valuable professional experience within a reputable institution, free from traditional expectations that come with starting a new job. It provides individuals who might otherwise face barriers to career development an opportunity to build skills and professional habits in a supportive environment that encourages growth and learning without fear of failure. Importantly, this initiative acknowledges and respects participants' lived experiences, addressing the unique challenges and sensitivities associated with their backgrounds. The programmatic model evolves frequently, working internally and externally to ensure its objectives are being met.

The Bard Associate Program (BAP) was founded under the leadership of Darren Walker, the 10th president of the Ford Foundation. It is a source of immense pride for Mr. Walker, who, as he reflected on his legacy, said of the BAP fellows:

We at the Ford Foundation are so grateful for the contributions that our talented Bard Prison Initiative fellows bring to our work, and it's a privilege to be able to partner with and learn from them as they launch their careers and chart new paths forward. (Walker, 2023)

As 19 associates have moved through the program in the past eight years, the impact of this program is not well-documented or understood by many. For these

associates, this program can be life-changing. BAP provides an unparalleled opportunity for formerly incarcerated people to immerse themselves in the professional workforce.

Formerly incarcerated people can face insurmountable collateral consequences upon their release—one of the most pressing concerns being barriers to employment. Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf from the Prison Policy Initiative found “that the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly five times higher than the unemployment rate for the general United States population” (2018). Beyond unemployment, formerly incarcerated people often face limited job opportunities, typically confined to “basic” or menial roles—an oversight that fails to acknowledge those with college education, like the fellows at the Ford Foundation. Couloute and Kopf reminded us that “formerly incarcerated people want to work. Their high unemployment rate reflects public will, policy, and practice—not differences in aspirations” (2018). Ford has witnessed firsthand how dedicated and hardworking its associates are and hopes their work with the BAP is a stepping stone that increases employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated people.

Systemic injustices and oppression for justice-involved individuals and communities also means that a portion of our society is not able to experience the full reach of their talent and potential; this inaccessibility to employment invariably has serious economic repercussions. Economists Cherrie Bucknor and Alan Barber from the Center for Economic and Policy Research suggested that the exclusion of formerly incarcerated job seekers results in a loss of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between \$78 and \$87 billion dollars annually (2016). Moreover, Bucknor and Barber highlighted in their report that the benefits of hiring formerly justice-involved individuals go beyond financial considerations, emphasizing the unique value they bring to the workforce. BAP seeks to address the stigma surrounding the employment of formerly justice-involved individuals by recognizing and celebrating their aspirations, talents, and potential.

When Mr. Walker announced BAP during an internal town hall meeting, the Ford Foundation's staff erupted in applause. Beyond helping people who are formerly incarcerated have a fair chance at professional employment opportunities, BAP also became a

chance for the foundation to reflect on inequality and preconceived notions in all its programming—including hiring practices. BAP became a way for the Ford Foundation to embody its mission of believing in the inherent dignity of all people.

This learning report, based on research conducted from September 2024 to January 2025, summarizes the knowledge and learnings from this program, as well as communicates the positive impact this kind of professional development program can have on formerly incarcerated individuals. In doing so, this learning report aims to tackle the following question: What have been the achievements of the Bard Associates Program to date? The answer to this question will be uncovered two ways. First, by gauging success from those directly impacted—the participants themselves—through survey data and interviews. Second, the report will consider the program’s unintended consequences, particularly how it has shaped the Ford Foundation’s work culture from the perspective of managers who worked closely with associates.



Pete Mauney

Methodology

To provide a comprehensive understanding of this program's impact, Tanner Christensen employed both qualitative and quantitative methods for analysis (Sword, 2024).

During the discovery phase, Christensen reviewed relevant documents to familiarize himself with the program, its purpose, and its evolution. Namely, he reviewed the internal proposal, the job descriptions for associates, and a 2021 program evaluation conducted by Duggins, global director of Talent Acquisition. In November 2024, a survey was distributed to all current and former associates in the program to gain an extensive understanding of their experiences. The survey resulted in a ~58% response rate (11/19 associates). See [Appendix II](#) for a copy of the survey questionnaire and see [Appendix III](#) for more information on survey design choices. A total of 15 one-on-one structured interviews were conducted on Google Meet, in-person, or over the phone. Three interviews were with current Bard Associates, five were with former Bard Associates, four were with Ford Foundation managers, and three were with BPI team members. Christensen's inquiry focused on several key areas: program strengths and weaknesses, participants' career preparedness sentiments, the program's workplace impact, its evolution, and potential improvements.

History of the Program

To set the program up for success, Kamilah Duggins and William Kelley, global directors of Ford Foundation's People and Culture team, engaged in a series of due diligence activities—including floating the idea to several foundation directors and hosting a focus group with BPI graduates to learn what their ideal program would encompass. Duggins and Kelley also met with a number of experts who have experience working with people who were formerly incarcerated, who shared their input on how the program could be run most effectively. Many of their insights centered on providing the associates with support across numerous domains, which helped them consider things like subsidizing associates' first three

months of commuting costs, hosting a panel discussion for staff to ask questions and share concerns in advance of the associates' start dates, and creating safe spaces for associates to share and process their experiences at Ford, as well as any subsequent concerns.

Since its launch in 2016, the program has achieved a 95% completion rate. Only one associate has not completed the program, and this was due to personal reasons.

While BPI graduates have the option to apply to the program directly upon release, many choose to spend time reintegrating into society before beginning their professional journey at Ford. It's also important to note that not all participants are unemployed when they join the program. Participants bring diverse career experiences to the program. Some have held office jobs, often in social service settings where they could draw on their lived experiences, while others have worked in different industries. BAP provides individuals with the opportunity to explore an abundance of possible career paths and take control of their professional futures, which is the main intended outcome of the program.

The program is based solely in the Ford Foundation's New York City office and is a collaboration between the Ford Foundation and the Bard Prison Initiative. However, the Ford Foundation manages most of the logistics, daily operations, and provides all funding from its yearly budget. The Bard Prison Initiative stays in contact with associates during their time at The Ford Foundation, because of their trusted relationship, mostly providing space for check-ins and support. To date, the Ford Foundation has invested \$1.922 million in the Bard Associates Program, with a total budget of \$2.42 million. Refer to [Appendix IV](#) for a detailed year-by-year financial breakdown.

Note

Bard Associates' names and identifying details have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

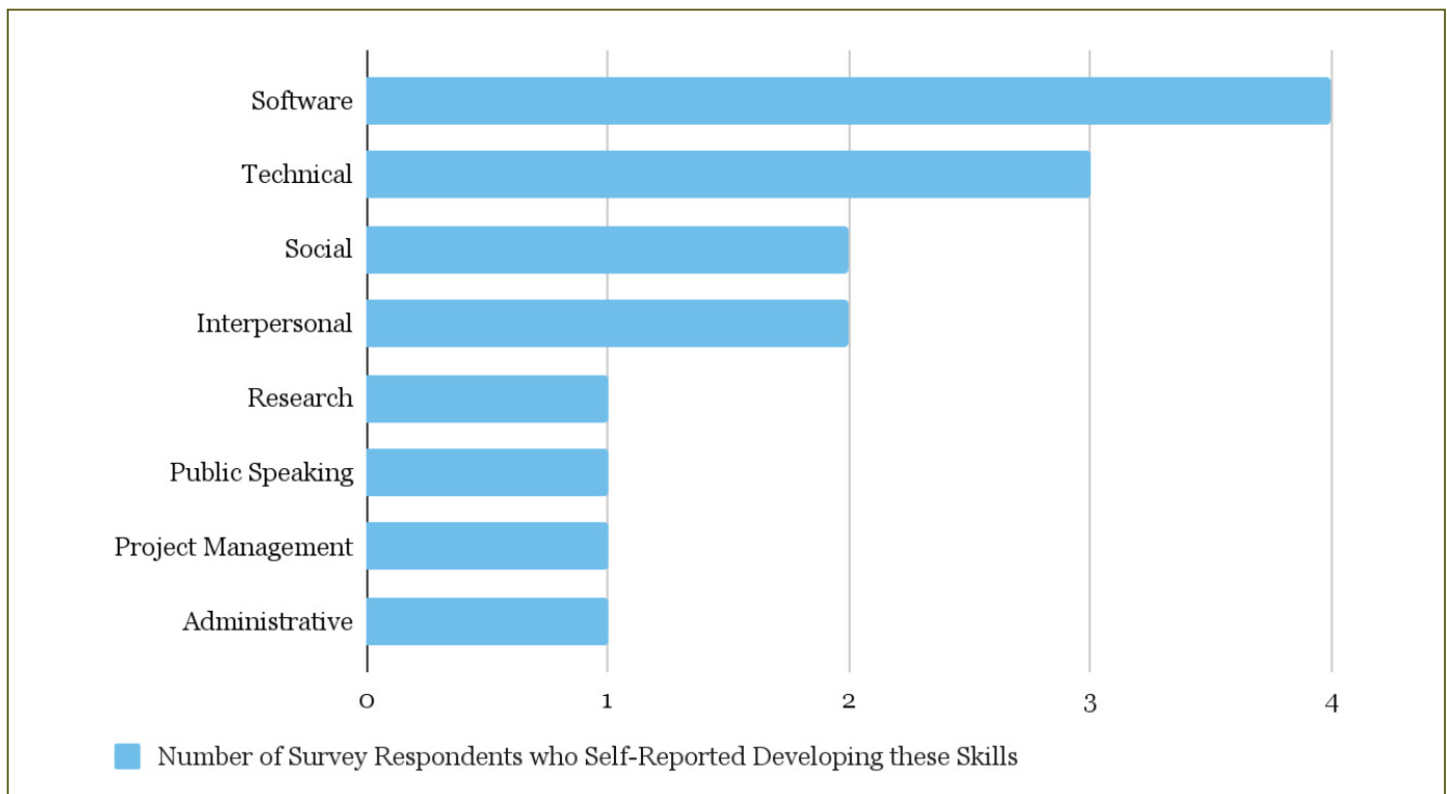
Key Results for Associates

1. Skills Development

The authors' research found that this program fosters skill development in a supportive environment, offering opportunities that may be unavailable elsewhere. Associates are entrusted with projects that contribute to the organization's goals while simultaneously developing valuable skills. Manager Elizabeth Vasek, director of Facilities Management, explained that these projects are not merely busy work, but legitimate tasks that impact the foundation and allow associates to cultivate essential project management skills. For instance, one associate completed a comprehensive budget analysis comparing the foundation's catering costs against external food prices, which directly affected catering costs and was shared with executive leadership.

The associates themselves attested to the program's impact on their skill development. Survey responses indicated growth in a range of areas, including interpersonal skills, software proficiency, technical abilities, research, public speaking, project management, and administrative tasks. This is corroborated by the interviews, in which many associates described significant skill-building and shared enthusiastic feedback, such as "everything [I] learned while I was there, I have implemented in some type of way when I branched out on my own."

Some associates enter the program with limited technology experience due to their incarceration, with some having had no access to technology. One associate recounted how they had never even been on the internet until their release from prison. Consequently, those without regular access to technology face a steep learning curve. As one participant shared, "everything was about catching up" because "this stuff was foreign to me prior to coming to Ford." Based on survey data, respondents highlighted that software and technical skills were the most significant skills that they learned.



2. Exploring New Opportunities

Each associate's career trajectory is shaped by their individual aspirations and the experiences gained through the program. The program helps to set the conditions for those aspirations to be realized. The report found that the program's structure exposes participants to a diverse range of experiences, broadening their understanding of professional possibilities. Through this exposure, they clarify existing interests and discover new ones. For instance, former associate Dylan Flores explained how rotating through Ford's People and Culture team sparked his interest in content management, a field he now hopes to pursue. This exploration is actively encouraged; as one interviewee noted, the foundation urges associates to "take advantage of it all." Beyond clarifying interests, the rotational structure "stretches their understanding of different management styles," says Therese Mai, associate director of Global Knowledge and Information Services.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that many BPI graduates are often steered towards social work due to their lived experiences. This program challenges this limiting trajectory, allowing participants to break free from predetermined paths and explore personally fulfilling careers. Some, like Reza Webb, entered the program specifically seeking a career change. He described how BAP empowers associates to forge their own paths "in an industry that is untapped for returning citizens."

Samantha Brody's journey exemplifies the program's transformative potential. After completing BAP, she founded a nonprofit dedicated to providing housing and support for formerly incarcerated people. She credited the program's rotational structure with equipping her with diverse skills, from processing expense reports to time management, all essential for leading her organization. "I don't know if I would have been able to launch my nonprofit as quickly and successfully without the support of the Ford Foundation," Brody reflected.

While Brody's story highlights the program's potential to inspire entrepreneurship, it also opens doors to new opportunities within philanthropy and other sectors.

3. Increased Stability

The author's research found that a key feature of this program is its commitment to fostering agency. By providing space, resources, and time, BAP empowers associates to recognize their power and exercise control over their career paths. Former associate Briana Berg emphasized that the program helps participants realize they can achieve things independently and pursue their own goals. Emmanuelle St Jean, director of NYC BPI Programs, echoed this sentiment: "We want people to have the opportunity to reimagine their futures; if you give them the opportunity, they will do it." The Ford Foundation's belief in this potential is validated by the experiences of current and former associates.

Interviews revealed that associates gain unprecedented agency over their careers during the program, not only through professional development opportunities, but also through the crucial elements of job and economic stability. As one associate explained, life after release from prison often revolves around basic survival—securing housing, employment, and food. These immediate needs overshadow long-term career aspirations. Many interviewees described being unable to focus on their professional development because they were consumed by the work of simply making ends meet. They lacked the energy and opportunity to contemplate career choices or even consider themselves eligible for certain fields. Former associate Enrique Montoya poignantly observed that "surviving takes away from the learning and rehabilitation" needed for professional growth. The Bard Associates Program provides that crucial opportunity by offering not just work experience and references, but also the stability that allows for genuine career exploration and development.

4. Enhanced Career Preparedness

The respondents noted that the program equips participants with credible work experience and professional development, enhancing their prospects for securing employment afterward. All four associates in the 2023-2024 cohort expressed confidence in their preparedness for their next career steps. Similarly, all four interviewees from previous cohorts reported feeling well-prepared for their post-program careers. Reza Webb works in the IT department at a foundation, Samantha Brody launched her own nonprofit, and both

Enrique Montoya and John Barlow have built successful careers in philanthropy. The survey responses indicate that everyone who completed the program and filled out the survey (8/8) moved onto gainful employment upon completion of the program.

Respondents noted that the program's support in securing employment after completion should be an area for improvement. Kamilah Duggins, Ford Foundation's global director of Talent Acquisition, acknowledged this, noting that the job search process is inherently variable and individualized. While the program does not guarantee employment, the Ford Foundation and Bard Prison Initiative have implemented resources to assist associates in their job search. These include resume writing services, career coaching, professional development funding, and access to existing Ford Foundation career resources.

This mixed experience is reflected in the survey data. When asked whether the program helped respondents find employment after leaving, seven (63.6%) reported complete assistance (5/5 rating), three (27.3%) reported partial assistance (4/5 rating), and one (9.1%) reported no assistance (1/5 rating). While the majority felt supported, some interviewees highlighted challenges in this area and the struggles of finding employment after leaving the program. Others, like Enrique Montoya, explicitly credited the program with helping them secure employment: "The Bard Associates Program helped me get another job at the Robin Hood Foundation... Ford

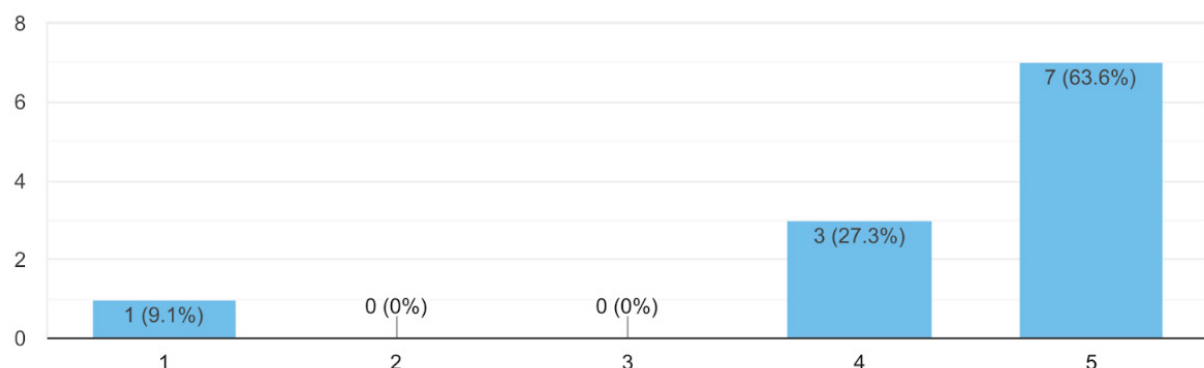
really helped me to contribute my skills and learnings into my position today."

Despite these successes, the lack of concrete employment opportunities after the program remains a recognized weakness. Four out of eleven survey respondents expressed a desire for improved post-program employment support, aligning with Duggins' observation that the program was not originally designed to guide participants through the job search process. In response, the foundation has increased its efforts to support associates in securing employment. For instance, in the most recent cohort structure, every associate was paired with a licensed career coach who helped develop their resume, start their LinkedIn page, write a robust cover letter, and work with them in numerous career counseling sessions.

An invaluable asset the program provides is a strong, credible job reference. This is particularly significant for justice-involved individuals who often face employment discrimination and may have limited professional work history due to incarceration. Jed Tucker, senior advisor for Reentry and Alumni Engagement for the Bard Prison Initiative, emphasized the value of this reference, suggesting that, at times, a reference from a credible institution—like the Ford Foundation—is more valuable to a justice-involved individual's career success than their liberal arts education and degree.

The Bard Associates Program helped position me to find employment after leaving the program.

11 responses



Although there have been improvements in the opportunities the Ford Foundation provides to associates, many of them still struggle to find meaningful, stable employment upon completion of the program. For instance, as the most recent cohort of associates left, three of the four associates did not have employment lined up. The staff has recognized this gap and endeavors to identify more ways to positively impact associates' job search.

5. Boosting Confidence

The respondents noted that the program cultivates a widespread sense of confidence in its participants, a stark contrast to their initial apprehension. Several associates admitted to feeling intimidated upon arrival, with some specifically mentioning the building's size as a source of apprehension. However, the foundation's open and welcoming environment quickly put them at ease. Benjamin Buenarte, for example, described how his time at Ford has transformed his comfort level in professional settings: "I feel more comfortable behind a computer; I feel more comfortable behind a desk; I feel more comfortable navigating through these corporate spaces." For Reza Webb, the program provided a crucial realization: "I can do it. I've done it before. I could do this again if I need to." The program empowers associates to see themselves as capable of working in professional environments, a possibility that, for some, had never seemed within reach. One survey respondent even identified the opportunity to experience working in an office setting as the program's most impactful element.

This newfound confidence goes beyond simply feeling comfortable in the workplace; associates develop a genuine sense of preparedness and value. "I feel more valuable. I feel like I have something to offer," shared Briana Berg. Dylan Flores echoed this sentiment: "Being here, coming in every day, knowing that I can do the work, knowing that I can make valuable contributions, has boosted my confidence exponentially and my belief in myself and my abilities." Samantha Brody recounted a pivotal moment during her time at Ford, a turning point where she realized that her colleagues and supervisors trusted her and didn't judge her based on her past. She described being surprised when her supervisor entrusted her with a credit card to make a team purchase, explaining, "It kind of blew my mind. I didn't expect them to [trust me]." She added, "That was actually a real boost. It made me feel really good

to know that. They weren't automatically just judging. They were giving me the benefit of the doubt and trusting me enough to give me that information and let me input it." The increased confidence reported by program graduates is a testament to BAP's success, and, crucially, a vital component of the associates' personal growth and well-being.

6. Expanding Professional Networks

The author's research found that the Ford Foundation provides associates with informal access to a diverse network of individuals, offering valuable knowledge, advice, and resources. Although not entirely built into the programmatic model, informal networking and mentorship are key experiences for many associates. John Barlow, a former associate, described forming lasting relationships with experienced philanthropy professionals—mentorship that proved pivotal in launching his career. He now leads the criminal justice portfolio at another foundation. Barlow traces his success back to a single connection, forged during a 2015 prison visit by Darren Walker: "That never would have happened if it wasn't for Darren coming into Eastern Correctional Facility and sitting down with incarcerated men that day."

Recognizing the importance of networking, managers actively encourage associates to connect with people across the foundation. One manager emphasized the program's strength in this area: "One of the greatest things that comes out of the program, beyond the learning, are the people you meet." The associates themselves agree; 45.5% of survey respondents independently cited networking and relationship-building as a key benefit.

7. Navigating Teamwork and Authority

The author found that for some participants, BAP provides their initial exposure to a collaborative team environment, which is crucial for developing skills in communication, collaboration, and working toward a shared goal. Navigating the dynamics of teamwork is a significant experience for all associates, particularly as they interact with colleagues with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. One associate mentioned how teamwork taught them not just how to communicate with different people, but how to work with them

professionally. The survey backs this up, with one respondent saying that team experience was the most impactful part of the program.

Beyond teamwork, building professional relationships with managers and supervisors can initially present challenges for some associates. One interviewee shared how their past experiences with authority figures within the prison system left them with a sense of distrust, stemming from witnessing and personally experiencing “misuse and abuse of authority.” However, they credited BAP with fostering a transformative shift. While initially resistant to feedback, they now “see the value in [it]... I welcome it.” This suggests that the program’s design can help facilitate significant personal growth by providing opportunities to re-evaluate assumptions and sensitivities surrounding authority within a supportive context. This underscores the profound importance of cultivating a safe and supportive space for all participants, a topic we will explore further in the subsequent section.

8. A Safe Space at Ford

From the outset, Kamilah Duggins and William Kelley recognized the importance of creating a safe space within the Bard Associates Program for associates to experiment and learn without fear of judgment or failure. Program respondents confirmed that BAP effectively fosters such an environment, encouraging a mindset that mistakes are not detrimental and that is a strength to be one’s authentic self at work. One interviewee, Benjamin Buenarte, elaborated on this, explaining that upon joining Ford, he felt reassured knowing his background was understood by everyone. He noted that this understanding allowed him to avoid the scrutiny and judgment he might have encountered in other workplaces that assume new hires possess all necessary hard and soft skills from day one. BAP distinguishes itself from other opportunities by not expecting perfection. The program encourages associates to develop the technical and relational skills needed for their future careers, acknowledging that learning involves making mistakes. A survey respondent highlighted this strength, noting that Ford provides spaces designed for growth and allows for mistakes within an environment committed to associate success. Duggins emphasized that the program does not focus on perfection or even adding value right away; instead, it focuses on providing associates with the opportunity

to learn and grow, giving them a soft place to land when mistakes do happen. Managers provide guidance and support, ensuring associates stay on track, but expectations are reasonable and fair. One survey respondent confirmed this, stating that the program’s greatest strength is “the ability to work in a stable environment and develop employability skills without being ostracized or judged through prejudice.”

The research suggests that a key aspect of fostering a learning and growth environment is the cohort structure. One interviewee explained that having multiple associates each year can help reduce feelings of isolation. Another interviewee emphasized the cohort’s tremendous support, particularly in sharing helpful resources. Furthermore, a survey respondent identified the participants themselves as BAP’s greatest strength. More recent associates also benefit from learning from program alumni through monthly lunches and other mentorship opportunities. This programming not only demonstrates the program’s potential outcomes (i.e., future career success) but also provides concrete evidence of others’ successful journeys, including valuable advice and insights. The combination of a peer cohort and a mentorship network provides significant support.

Key Results for the Ford Foundation Work Culture

1. Positive Impact on Organizational Work Culture

The Bard Associates Program demonstrably enriches the Ford Foundation's organizational culture by cultivating a deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives and the resilience of its associates. Manager respondents stated that each of their teams admired the hard work and the inspiring journeys of each associate in the program, often forming genuine friendships. This fosters a more connected and empathetic workplace. Moreover, some managers noted that the program elevated their team's collective sense of purpose and mission by helping associates reach their full potential. While every manager acknowledged the program's demands, they unequivocally affirmed its positive impact, with one stating that their team wouldn't want to discontinue the program and another emphasizing its contribution to both team cohesion and individual development.

Furthermore, the BAP aligns strongly with the foundation's goal to include a variety of perspectives and lived experiences in the workplace. The program not only offers opportunities to individuals who have faced significant barriers but also enriches the workplace by broadening perspectives and fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment. One staff member shared that "nobody even thinks of them as Bard Associates," which suggests that the associates are fully integrated into their teams, a testament to the program's success in promoting belonging. Ultimately, the Bard Associates Program appears to be cultivating a more empathetic, diverse, and high-performing work environment.

2. Impact on Manager Development

BAP also appears to have a significant impact on the managers involved, contributing to their professional growth. In the most recent cohort, managers received training from CEO Works specifically designed to help them understand the unique skills developed by associates and the challenges they face after being incarcerated. One manager, Elizabeth Vasek, detailed how this was "such a rewarding experience as a manager." Since this is often an associate's first professional experience, there can be a significant skills gap, requiring more time than with typical hires. Even seemingly basic tasks like writing professional emails, sending meeting invites, creating project plans, or using Excel may be new learning experiences, requiring patience and time for instruction. These instructional opportunities expand managers' perspectives, requiring them to quickly assess individual capabilities, develop tailored teaching methods for fundamental professional skills, and strategically assign projects to facilitate growth. This process, as Vasek described, can feel like a "giant puzzle" but provides invaluable practice in leveraging strengths and fostering development. Therese Mai shared, "I have also learned so much from this program" and described how "this experience challenged me to navigate complex situations as a manager, providing support while ensuring [Bard Associates] received essential feedback." The program's emphasis on continuous feedback—crucial for the associates' steep learning curve—also hones managers' feedback delivery skills. Ultimately, the BAP seems to provide managers with valuable opportunities to refine their leadership skills, particularly in navigating complex situations, providing effective support and feedback, and cultivating a strong belief in the potential for growth within their team members.

Overall Assessment

The results indicate that thus far, the Bard Associates Program has been successful in providing associates with substantial work experience and professional development opportunities. One effective approach to evaluating the program's success is to directly ask associates about their experiences and perceptions of its impact on their lives. Consequently, one survey question directly asked respondents, "How would you rate your overall experience with the Bard Associates Program?" from "Very Unsatisfied" to "Very Satisfied" on a 5-point Likert scale. 72.7% of respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with the program, rating the program a 5/5. The remaining 27.3% of respondents also positively rated the program as a 4/5.

These results suggest that the program was effective in achieving intended outcomes and provided significant value to participants. This is further validated by another 5-point Likert scale question that asked respondents, "How likely would you be to recommend this fellowship to others who have been incarcerated?". 81.8% of respondents said that they would be very

likely to recommend this program to others with 5/5 support, and 18.2% said they would be somewhat likely to recommend the program with 4/5 support.

Collectively, these survey results suggest the effectiveness of the program, as well as the degree to which this program provided value to participants—even to the extent that at least every respondent indicated that, to some degree, they would recommend this program to others.

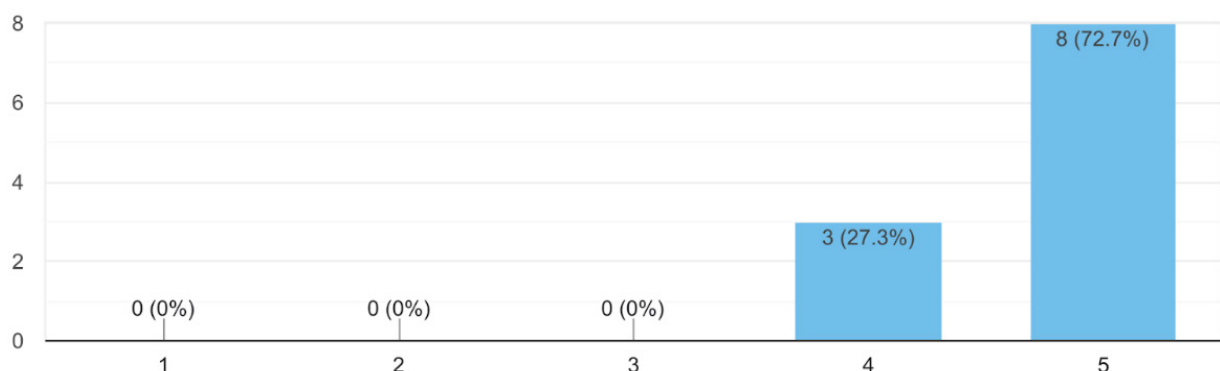
Survey respondents were also asked, "What aspects of the program did you find valuable?" and could select all that applied to their experience. The following data visualization shows the program's perceived value across numerous areas.

This breadth of positive responses suggests two key points. First, the program effectively supports associates in multiple ways, extending beyond the two years of job security and experience. Second, the distribution of responses indicates diverse individual experiences, highlighting that each associate's engagement with the program is unique.

The interviews reinforced the success of the program. One associate noted, "Ford is probably the best job that I've ever had." Another said, "I loved it so much, I wish I could go back." They added, "I am so fond of the program and its purpose. I know that Ford is changing lives every day." The interviews revealed how for

How would you rate your overall experience with the Bard Associates Program?

11 responses

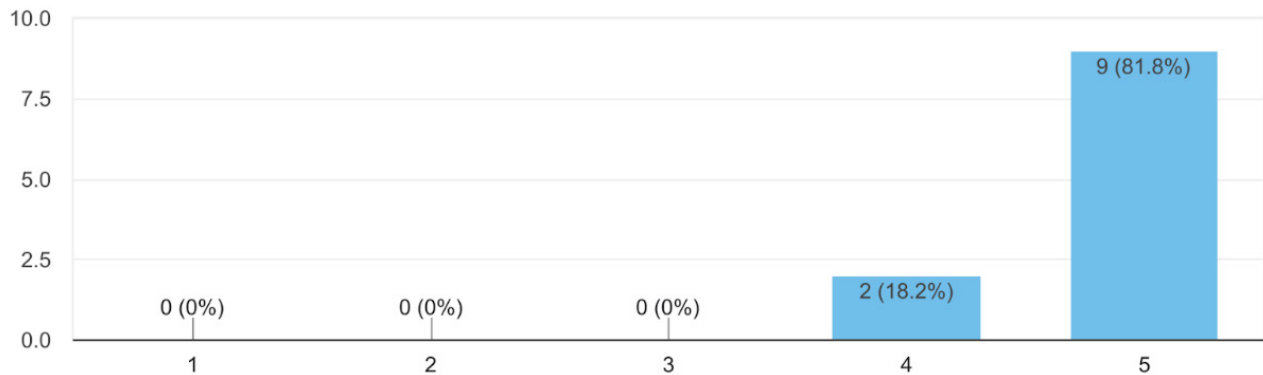


some, this program had an impact on a personal and professional level, and was the best launchpad for their career success.

Beyond the associates, the program demonstrably impacted the Ford Foundation. Interviews with every team revealed overwhelming agreement on the program's positive impact both personally and professionally. Every manager surveyed recommended continuing the program—despite any challenges that they faced along the way.

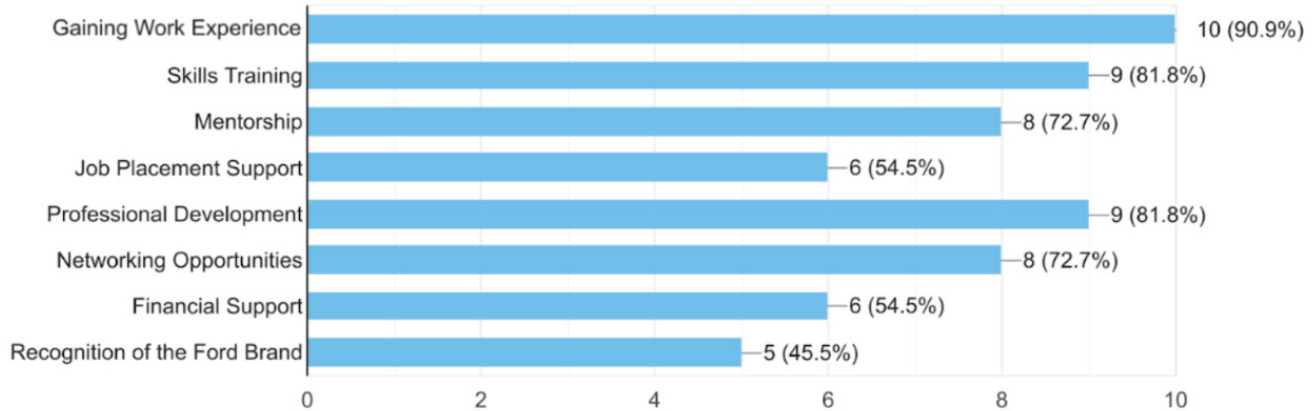
How likely would you be to recommend this fellowship to others who have been incarcerated?

11 responses



What aspects of the program did you find valuable? (Check all that apply)

11 responses



Considerations for the Future

This section moves beyond the specific results of the Bard Associates Program to explore broader considerations and insights that emerged during this investigation. Building upon these findings, we will discuss potential ways for the program to improve.

Timing of Program Participation

Many associates indicated that this program may be challenging for someone just returning home. Prior to entering the workforce, specifically in this capacity, they need to first have some kind of foundation to excel and acclimate to the world beyond prison. Otherwise, as Dylan Flores described, it can be very overwhelming. Samantha Brody reinforced this perspective, suggesting that this program is best suited for people who have returned home for a bit of time and had the chance to reacclimate.

Navigating Power Dynamics

Working with people who were formerly incarcerated brings about certain considerations and vulnerabilities. Power imbalances can be particularly challenging and triggering. One associate mentioned how important it is for associates to be working with thoughtful, supportive managers that see eye-to-eye. A less thoughtful management approach could lead to a relationship that feels overly hierarchical, potentially reactivating past trauma. One manager outlined how the power imbalances were sometimes challenging, recounting that fellows occasionally viewed supervisory decisions with resistance or suspicion. Accordingly, it is critical to have well-trained managers who are educated on power dynamics at work and trauma connected to incarceration. The program does have training for all managers who work with associates. One manager emphasized the importance of this training because “there are certain sensitivities and sensibilities that you have to understand when you work with people who have different lived experiences, but also trauma.”

Manager Preparedness and Onboarding

When an associate joined a team, the most successful experiences seemed to be ones where the associate and the manager were on the same page with respect to expectations and workload. For instance, Benjamin Buenarte recalled how, on his first day working with Elizabeth Vasek, she provided him with a pamphlet of everything he was going to learn and do throughout his rotation. Other rotations and managers seemed to have a routinized method for laying out expectations. Regardless, having these materials prepared beforehand was helpful.

Cultivating a Positive and Inclusive Work Environment

For associates to succeed, the organization needs to have a robust, positive work culture. Samantha Brody outlined how the biggest takeaway from her experience was realizing how important work culture is. This stemmed from her witnessing how “Ford values their employees.” She continued, “when you like your job and you’re happy with your job, you tend to actually work harder.” For Bard Associates, it is critical that they are exposed to positive, enriching work environments so they can recognize that value when searching for other employment opportunities. Beyond the enriching experience, it is also important that the work culture is accepting and open. The results suggest that for Bard Associates to fully experience a sense of belonging, it is important that the existing work culture is inclusive and understanding of diverse lived experiences. One BAP manager highlighted the importance of seamless integration, noting that associates are readily accepted as integral members of their teams. This seamless inclusion is critical in preventing feelings of ostracization or disconnection from their colleagues and the broader work environment.

The Importance of Comprehensive Support

Beyond feeling embedded in the work culture, associates also reported feeling supported through their fellowship. Without support systems, as experts indicated in the program’s design, associates’ chances of success would dwindle. One survey respondent wrote that the most impactful part of their experience was “getting unwavering support from the teams [they] worked with.” Another indicated that the “Ford staff

care about every single participant.” Although seemingly obvious, support is fundamental, and this program would not be successful if associates felt unsupported. One survey question asked, “How supported did you feel by Ford staff during your fellowship?” On a 5-point Likert scale, 72.7% selected “completely” supported, and 23.7% selected “somewhat” supported. These results indicate that associates felt supported by staff, and this was further supported by individual survey and interview responses.

Beyond Ford staff, the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) also maintains contact. The survey similarly asked, “How supported did you feel by BPI staff during your fellowship?” On the same scale, 63.6% indicated “completely” supported; 18.2% felt “somewhat” supported; and 18.2% felt “neither” supported nor unsupported. These results indicate that, for some associates, they felt less supported by BPI staff than Ford staff. Consequently, this may be one area of improvement.

Developing Essential Soft Skills

The program helps associates enhance their soft skills immensely. Many associates come into the program without the ability to talk in a team environment, coordinate their time effectively, or problem solve. Leaving the program, associates are all able to do these things confidently because of the immersive, experiential learning environment. John Barlow mentioned that his biggest takeaway is the soft skills he built, and how he carries each of these skills with him in his role as a program officer.

Bridging the Technology Gap

Many associates do not have the latest technology skills and experience—mostly because they did not have access while incarcerated. As a result, associates go through numerous computer skills courses. From the survey, two respondents specifically raised that technology and computer skills were some of the most helpful things they learned.

The lack of technical skills uniquely makes the IT track challenging. Associates’ lack of exposure to technology is a huge barrier to career advancement in technical fields. In IT, of the five people who went through the

program, there were only two notable successes because the others encountered numerous challenges with the technical acumen required. Nevertheless, the IT manager reinforced the critical importance of continuing this work, demonstrating that even within demanding fields, associates exhibit exceptional dedication, making the investment of time, energy, and resources worthwhile. Providing more extensive onboarding for associates in technology skills was identified as a potential solution for the challenges encountered in the IT role.

Recognizing the Non-Monolithic Nature of Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Perhaps the most crucial takeaway from this report, drawn from the diverse experiences and varied responses from program participants, is the recognition that formerly incarcerated individuals are not a monolithic group. Each person’s experiences, backgrounds, and responses to the program are unique. This inherent diversity necessitates a nuanced approach to program evaluation and implementation. It would be misleading and even irresponsible to suggest that the program provides uniform benefits to all formerly incarcerated individuals. Therefore, future research and program development should prioritize understanding these individual variations and tailoring support services to meet specific needs. By acknowledging and addressing this diversity, the program can maximize its impact and better serve the diverse population it aims to support.

Considerations Going Forward

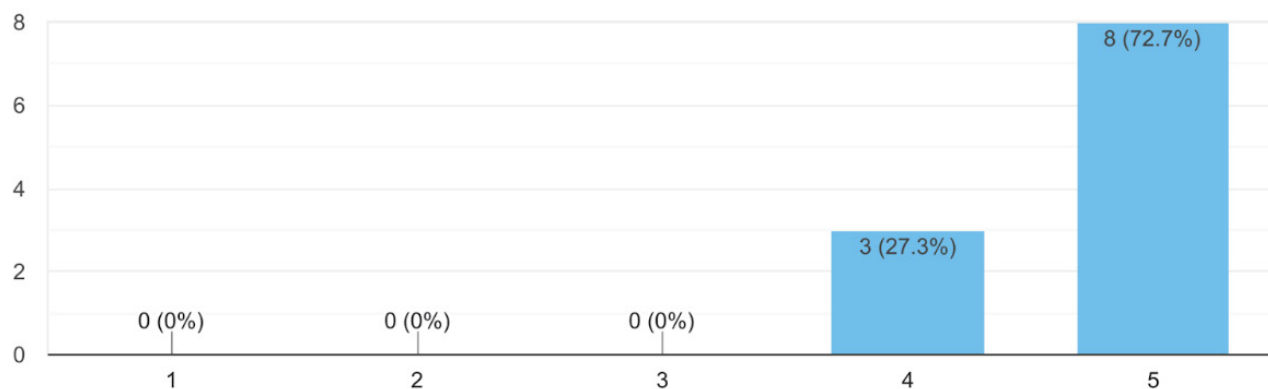
Every year, BAP evolves and is strengthened by the feedback and changes that are implemented, which further cements this program as uniquely successful for the field. With this learning report, new ways to improve the program have been uncovered. In the survey, associates were directly asked to provide feedback on ways the program could be further improved. Here are some ideas that were raised:

- Increased networking opportunities that are structured on smaller scales. This would allow associates to develop their networking skills over time and allow associates to build off of each networking opportunity.
- Many associates raised how they wished

the program would have better employment opportunities, and/or structured job placements to go to after leaving the program. As aforementioned, this is one of the program's gaps. Part of giving associates agency in their careers is allowing them to flourish after the program, and so this is one piece of feedback that program staff will continue to consider.

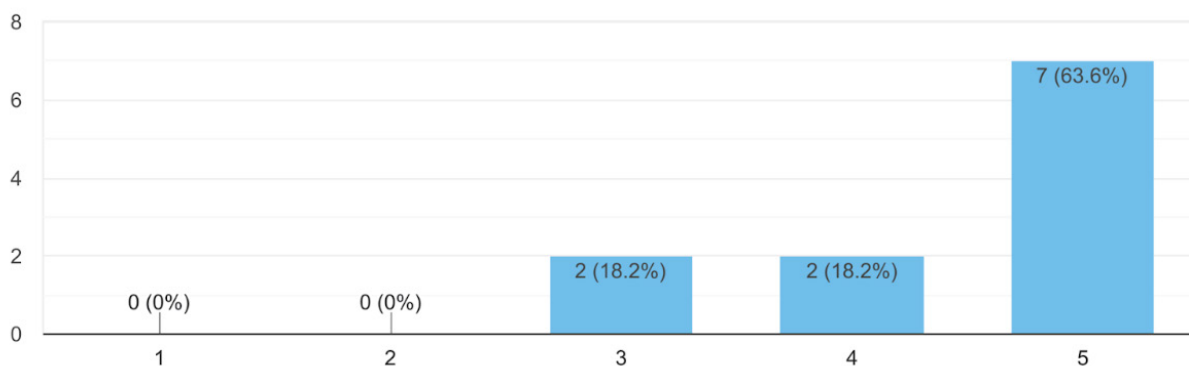
How supported did you feel by Ford staff during your fellowship?

11 responses



How supported did you feel by BPI staff during your fellowship?

11 responses



Conclusion

Since 2016, the Bard Associates Program has achieved strong results. The program has not only equipped associates with invaluable skills, enhanced their career preparedness, and expanded their professional networks, but it has also fostered a profound sense of confidence, teamwork, and agency. The overwhelmingly positive outcomes for associates, including increased confidence and career agency, are undeniable. Furthermore, the program has yielded unexpected benefits for the Ford Foundation itself, positively influencing workplace culture and enhancing managerial development. Job placement upon program completion, however, remains an area of continued focus.

The Ford Foundation recognizes the Bard Associates Program's significant impact in upholding the dignity and potential of formerly incarcerated individuals, aligning seamlessly with the foundation's core mission. By offering this transformative opportunity, the foundation goes beyond simple advocacy, actively fostering an environment where all individuals can thrive and contribute meaningfully to society.

The Ford Foundation is proud to have invested in and supported the Bard Associates Program. Given its success, the foundation might inspire other organizations and philanthropies to create similar initiatives, fostering a shift in employment practices and opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals. As the Bard Associates Program continues to flourish, its legacy will undoubtedly endure, both within the walls of the Ford Foundation and in the lives it has touched. This program has empowered associates to seize control of their career paths, and the transformative outcomes highlight the profound impact that providing opportunities for personal and professional growth can have on individuals and communities.

Appendix I – Methodology

The analysis aims to evaluate the success of this program by triangulating data from internal documents, surveys completed by associates, and interviews with various stakeholders involved in the program. As a note: This report was edited with the assistance of Google's Advanced Gemini system under human supervision, but artificial intelligence was not used to analyze any data or produce any findings.

Discovery documents were provided by Kamilah Duggins, global director of Talent Acquisition at Ford and co-founder of the Bard Associates Program.

Designed using Google Forms, the survey employed rigorous research methods, including bias limitation, mixed-method data collection, and a strong focus on safeguarding respondents' privacy and time.

Interviews were entirely structured, following an [interview schedule](#) that had been polished and reviewed by the Ford Foundation's Office of Strategy and Learning team. Interview [recordings](#) and [transcriptions](#) aided in solidifying quotes from the participants, as well as ensuring consistency in response analysis. If participants did not consent to recording or transcribing, these materials were not collected or preserved. See [Appendix III](#) for more information on interview design choices.

Appendix II - Survey Questionnaire

Section 1:

Bard Associates Program Evaluation Survey:

Please submit feedback regarding your experience in the Bard Associates Program. This information will be used for an impact report of the program, which will be made available to the public. Thank you so much for taking the time to thoughtfully respond to this survey.

1. Name _____
2. Where do you work now? If unemployed, please state. _____

Section 2:

3. How would you rate your overall experience with the Bard Associates Program?

Very Unsatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

4. Do you feel the program successfully provided what you were looking for when you joined?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

5. The Bard Associates Program helped position me to find employment after leaving the program.

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Section 3:

6. What aspects of the program did you find valuable? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Gaining Work Experience
- ☐ Skills Training
- ☐ Mentorship
- ☐ Job Placement Support
- ☐ Professional Development
- ☐ Networking Opportunities
- ☐ Financial Support
- ☐ Recognition of the Ford Brand

Section 4:

7. What specific skills or knowledge did you gain that have been helpful to your job or career?
8. How beneficial were the professional development opportunities?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

9. How supported did you feel by Ford staff during your fellowship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

10. How supported did you feel by BPI staff during your fellowship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 Completely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Section 5:

11. What was the most impactful part of the program for you?
12. What do you believe are the program's strengths?
13. The program has recently evolved to a 2-year program with more professional development opportunities, but we are still looking for ways to further improve the program. What aspects of the fellowship program could be further improved?

Section 6:

14. How likely would you be to recommend this fellowship to others who have been incarcerated?

Very Likely 1 2 3 4 5 Very Unlikely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

15. How likely would you be to recommend other organizations and philanthropies take on a similar program?

Very Likely 1 2 3 4 5 Very Unlikely
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Section 7:

16. Any other insights?

Appendix III – Further Methodology

Survey Design Choices:

Surveys were sent individually to each associate's personal email address, as provided to the Ford Foundation and cross-referenced with contact information from the Bard Prison Initiative. Reminder emails were sent on days 4 and 7 after the initial contact if there was no response. The survey resulted in an approximate 58% response rate, which is considered excellent to marketing professional Lucia Chung (n.d.). Other researchers indicate that the goal should be around 60%, which aligns closely with the response rate acquired (Fincham, 2008).

Each email included background information about the project, the importance of individual responses, the estimated time required to complete the survey, and a direct link to the form.

Sections were implemented to help respondents stay on track and focused. Google Forms' interface allowed these sections to be separated, so the respondent could not move onto the next section until all questions were answered on the current section.

All survey questions were also required, so all respondents needed to input something for every question before submission. This prevented respondents from skipping ahead.

There was an intentional variety of types of survey questions, including dropdown, open-ended, and Likert scale. This diversification produces a more comprehensive understanding of respondents' attitudes and perspectives, providing a rich data set for analysis (SurveyMonkey, n.d.)

Interview Design Choices:

Interviewing all the people that were involved in the Bard Associates Program was critical in gathering rich, qualitative primary source data that uncovered deep insights into people's experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Interviewees were selected by Kamilah Duggins and Tanner Christensen. Many of the interviewees were those closest to the program and therefore, the people that could discuss the program at great length. All current associates were interviewed to gain a fresh perspective on the program, including their thoughts on the new implementation of the two-year model. Former associates were also invited to interview, and all four of those to whom Christensen reached out agreed to and completed an interview. Those associates were determined by Duggins' perspective on who could provide insight into the program, coupled with Christensen's interest in gaining more insight from a select number of survey responses. The managers from the Ford Foundation were all those who have worked with more than one associate—many managing at least one associate every year. From BPI, all three people that were interviewed have been crucial to BAP's founding and ongoing programming.

Appendix IV – Financial Analysis

Bard Associates Program \$ in 000's

		2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022*	2023	2024	Total
Total Budget		400	320	325	325	350	350	350	350	2,770
Actuals:	Compensation & Benefits	300	213	294	310	112	-	327	351	1,906
	Training & Development	-	3	2	-	-	-	1	2	8
	Travel & Convening	2	1	0	2	-	-	1	1	7
	Total	\$ 302	\$ 217	\$ 296	\$ 312	\$ 112	\$ -	\$ 329	\$ 354	\$ 1,922

Financial data pulled from Ford Foundation's Finance and Accounting team. Special thanks to Susan Cordice and Mai-Anh Fox. The Bard Associates Program is considered a direct conduct of charitable activities and is funded from Ford's grant budget.

*There were no actuals in 2022 because there were no Bard Associates at the Ford Foundation in 2022 to determine next steps after the Covid-19 pandemic.

