



FoodLab Chicago Impact Evaluation

Prepared by the Association for Enterprise Opportunity
December 2020



FoodLab Chicago Participating Organizations:



Sponsors:



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Overview

Program Goal:

FoodLab Chicago (FLC) is a partnership between FoodLab Detroit, the Greater Chatham Initiative, the South Shore Chamber of Commerce, and the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO).

Launched amidst the pandemic, FoodLab Chicago's goal is to ensure the stability, longevity, and ongoing survival of local Black-owned, food-based businesses located along the 71st and 75th Street corridors.

Through responsive curriculum, networking opportunities, and one-on-one coaching and support by industry experts, FoodLab Chicago's focus was to address the liquidity crisis; keep businesses going so as few people lose their jobs as possible; reduce the financial impact on Black communities; and otherwise mitigate the severe economic consequences of this global pandemic.

FoodLab Chicago: By the Numbers

- **22** Participants
- **10** Sessions
- **\$1.7M** Received in Emergency Financing
- **7** Locations Closed due to COVID and Re-Opened
- **8** New Outlets/Stores Opened or In Process of Opening
- **1** Business Experienced Growth Through Acquisition
- **63%** of Participants Experienced Increases in Revenue Relative to Levels at Program Start
- **36%** of Participants Increased Employment Relative to Levels at Program Start
- **52% to 79%** of Participants Reported Moderate or Significant Improvements in Trust in Small Business Support Organizations, Community Banks and Credit Unions, and Government Agencies

Executive Summary

AEO's research has identified three key factors contributing to the struggles Black entrepreneurs face in starting and growing a successful business: the wealth, credit, and trust gaps. FoodLab Chicago sought to address the interplay of these three gaps in its community of Black-owned, food-based businesses while pressures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously weighed on them and their participants. As a result, the program focused on helping businesses stabilize and recover in these three areas, setting them up for future success.

With social distancing, mandated closures, and a general sense of fear in the air, businesses were in crisis mode—89% reduced operating hours, 79% reduced employee hours, and over 50% had to lay off employees. In these difficult and uncertain times, the program was a ray of hope for many, providing entrepreneurs with support and motivation and enabling them to respond, recover, and be resilient.

Program participants appreciated the program content provided them with new ideas, strategies, and tools that they could immediately implement in their businesses to cut costs, improve operating efficiency, generate revenue, or otherwise improve their operations. About a third of participants reported selling products and/or services online and another third developed new products or services to sell as a result of what they learned in the program. Significant shares reported building or improving their businesses' website (47%) and social media presence (37%) in order to facilitate their online sales and to drive foot traffic to their business. As a result of these pivots the program helped participants to make, most businesses experienced increases in revenue (63%) relative to their levels at the beginning of the program and participants were hopeful that revenues would continue to rise in the coming year. Given the current economic uncertainty, fewer businesses were able to increase employment beyond pre-program levels (36%), though participants did feel confident that if current trends continued, they would be able to increase employment over the next year.

The program was extremely effective in helping participants access emergency financing. Prior to joining FoodLab, participants had experienced difficulty, particularly in applying for PPP/EIDL loans, and collaborative members noted that many did not have their financial books in order, contributing to their lack of early success. Program coaches helped 13 participants transition from "checkbook accounting" to QuickBooks, a move which will eventually enable participants to generate financial statements whenever needed and facilitating the application process for future grant and loan opportunities. The program also helped participants build relationships with community lenders, with two participants specifically noting that these new relationships were game changers. In total, the program helped participating businesses access \$1.7 million in emergency funding.

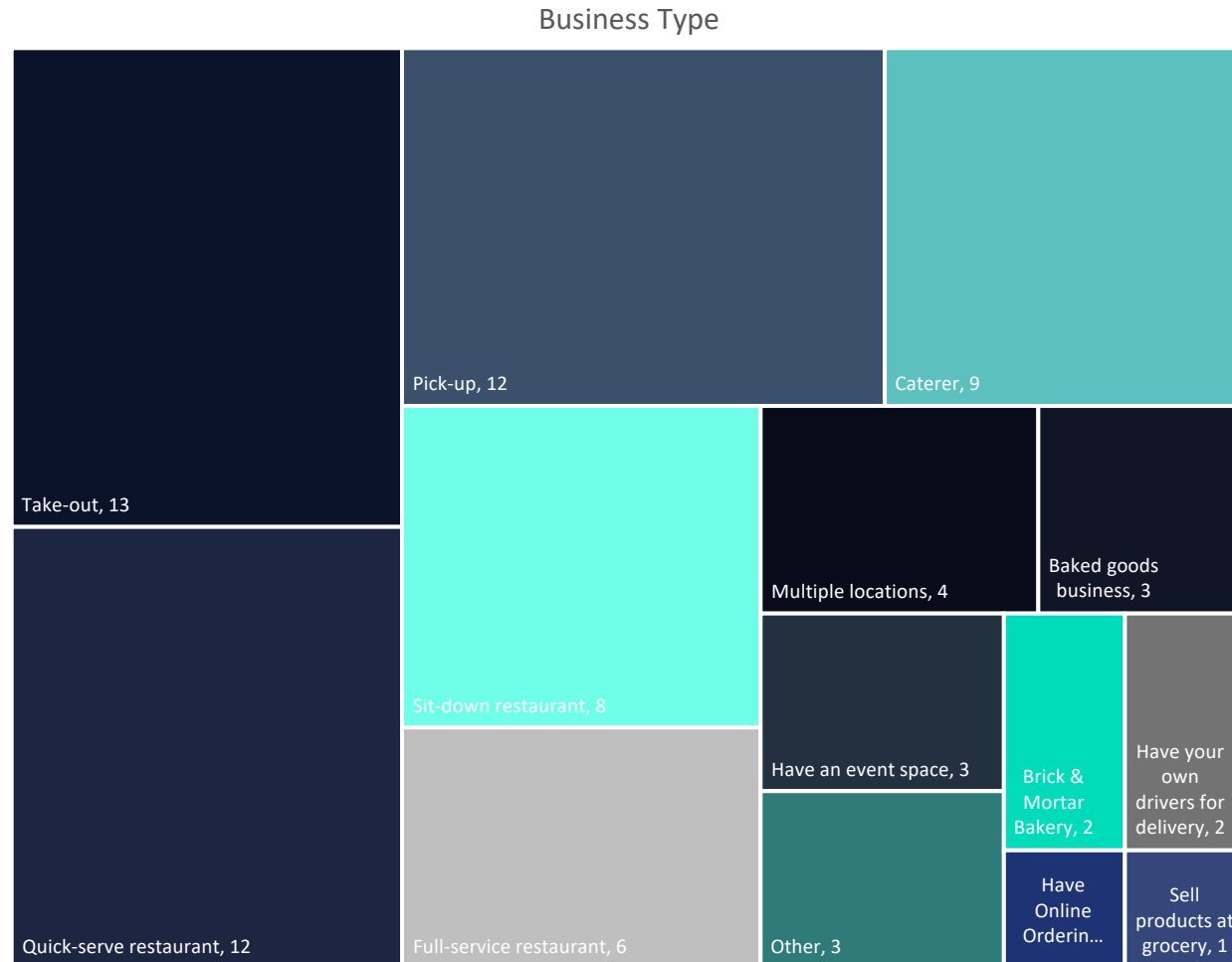
Beyond the more tangible benefits of increased knowledge and access to resources, many participants particularly appreciated the community that was built around FoodLab. Having a community of like-minded business owners who looked like them helped participants feel like they were "not alone" and "soothed" their souls. At a time of heightened stress, participants felt that having a sense of community was extremely important and helped keep them grounded and motivated.

While most participants were extremely satisfied with the FoodLab program, we identified three key areas of opportunity to be explored with future programming that also take into account the fact programming is likely to continue to be delivered in a digital environment for the foreseeable future.



Program Participant Profile

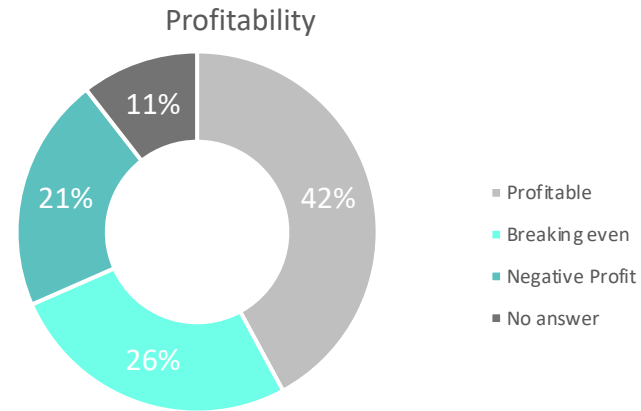
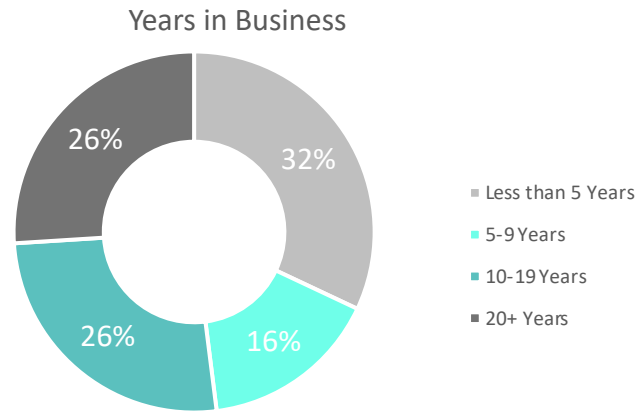
FoodLab Chicago served a diverse set of African-American food businesses



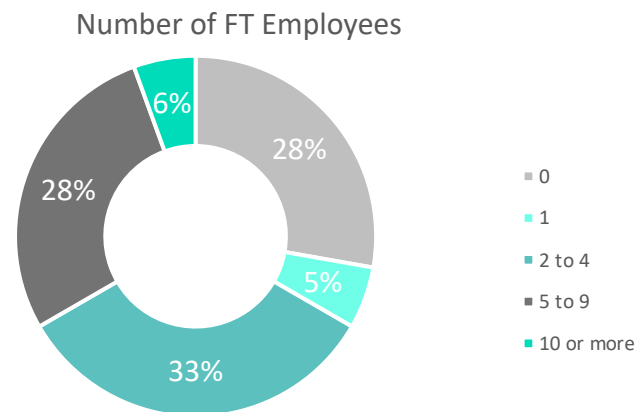
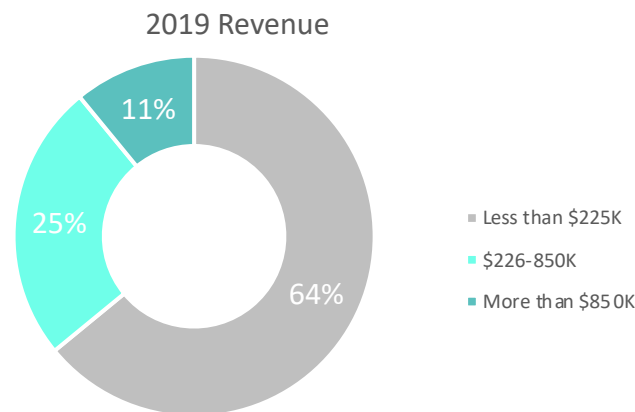
While FoodLab Chicago's participants were all food businesses, they each come from different backgrounds and experiences:

- 12 quick-serve restaurants
- 8 were sit-down restaurants
- 9 offered catering services
- 4 had multiple locations
- 2 had their own delivery drivers

The program was largely comprised of businesses that had been in operation for a significant amount of time, though most businesses were relatively small

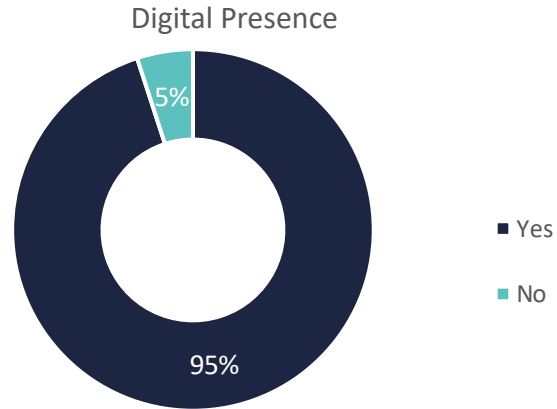


Years in business ranged from three to 55 years, with over half of participants having been in business for more than 10 years.



Most businesses were relatively small—64% had revenues less than \$225,000 in 2019 and 33% either had no full-time employees or only one—about two thirds of businesses were either breaking even or profitable prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly all participants said that they had a digital presence



68% had a website



84% had Facebook



26% had Twitter



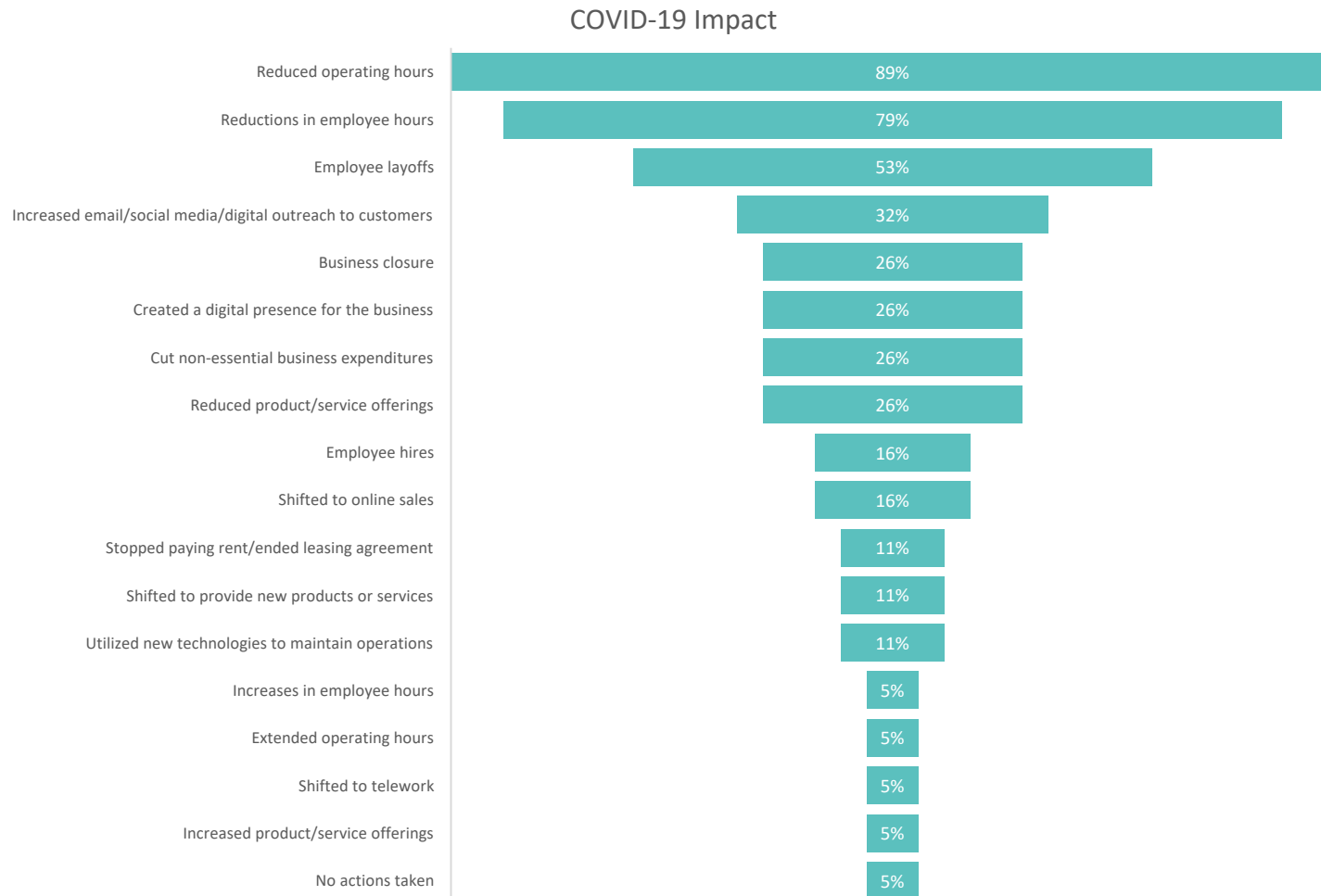
74% had Instagram

Facebook and Instagram were the most prevalent social media platforms (digital channels) leveraged by businesses.

Given the importance of a digital presence in today's economy, participants are also taking the opportunity to further develop and grow their online presence.

- 11% indicated they were working on developing their website
- 5% reported working on developing an Instagram and/or Twitter account for their business, while others were making improvements to their existing digital presence.

The participating businesses have been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic



Many businesses have reduced operating hours (89%) and/or employee hours (79%). More than half (53%) had to layoff employees and 26% were temporarily closed.

Participants have begun to make pivots and adjustments to their businesses in order to stabilize. About one in four have created a digital presence for their business and one in three have increased their customer outreach. About 16% have shifted to online sales. And 11% have shifted to provide new products or services.

The FoodLab Chicago program represents an excellent opportunity to help guide these businesses through the pandemic and to provide the support and resources they need to stabilize, shift, and succeed.



MAJANI

Soulful Vegan Cuisine

773.359.4019

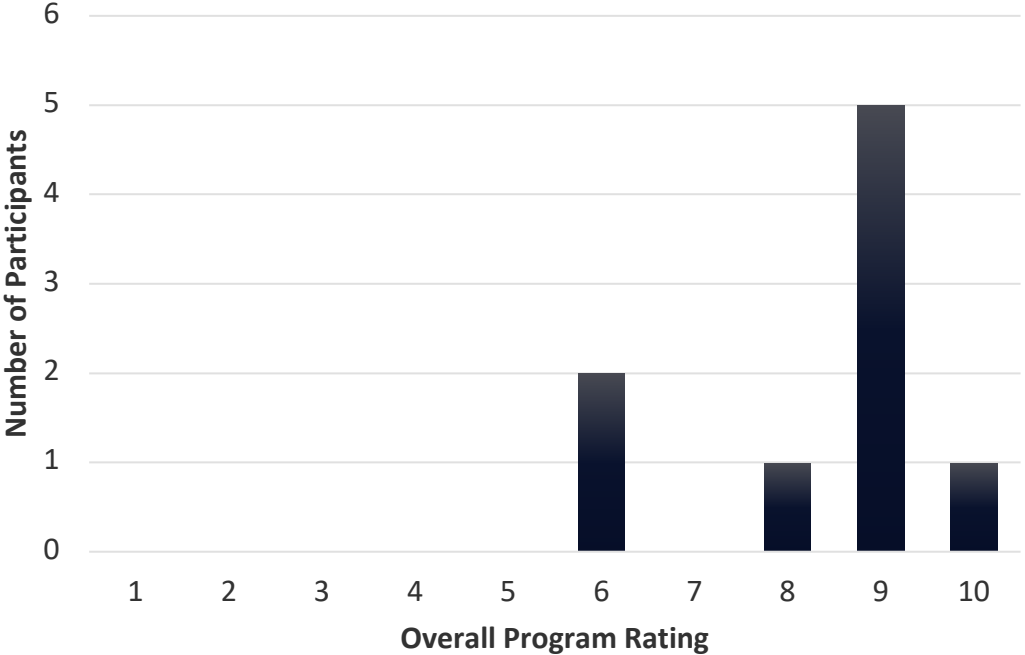
Program Participant Feedback

Participants generally found the FoodLab Chicago program extremely helpful, giving it an average score of 9.2 out of 10 in terms of usefulness

Average Program Rating



9.21/10



When asked to share their experiences working with FoodLab Chicago, program participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity that the program provided for them to learn and grow as a business and for the partnerships it helped them forge:

“A great opportunity for business to grow and refresh what they may know. Great opportunity to meet others who share the same passion as you.”

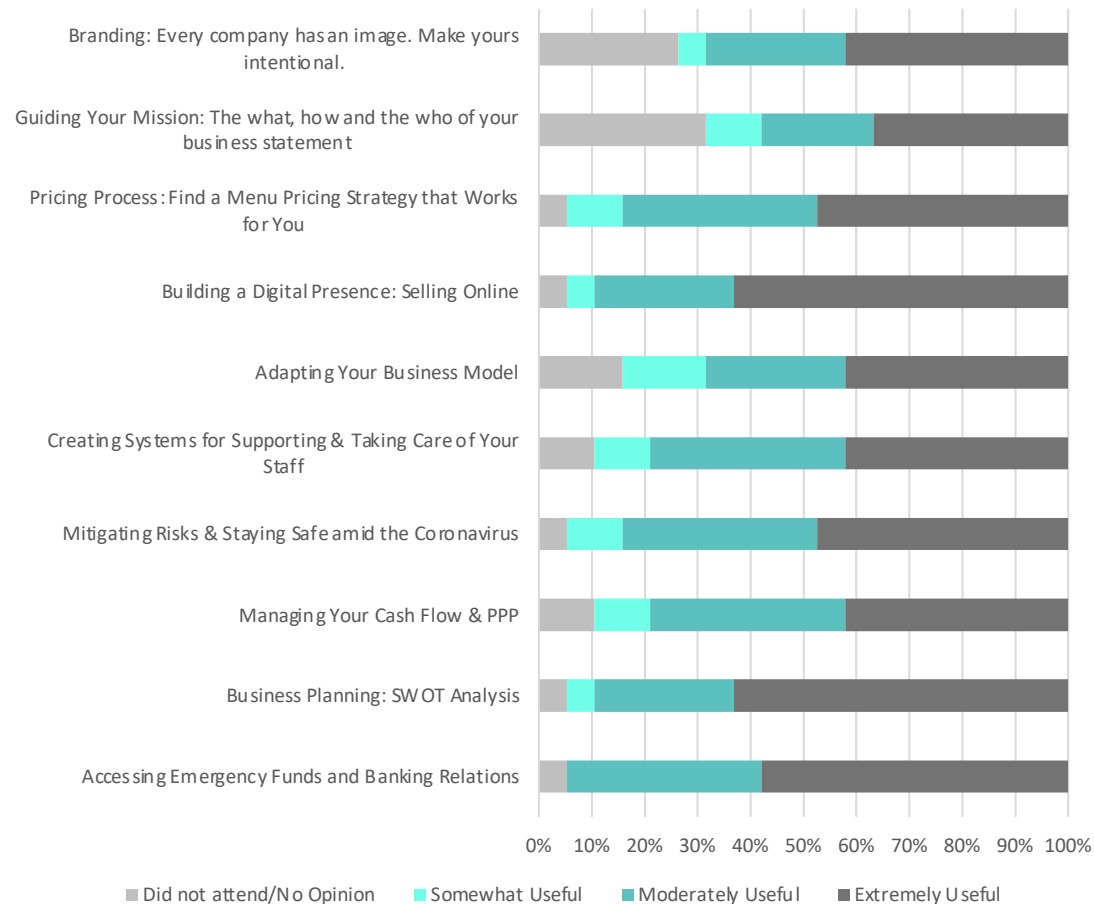
“Working with Devita, Hyacinth, Nedra, Erick and John has been a great learning experience and impactful to the community.”

“The program connected us to a market that we had always wanted to work with but did not have the staff or knowledge to make happen. Through these new partnerships, we are in a position to more fully realize our organization’s mission, vision and values to build a strong and resilient local food system from farm to fork that benefits people at all stages of the food system...We look forward to the opportunity to participate in FoodLab 2.0 in order to implement the many useful lessons and strategies gained in this first cohort. Thank you for the opportunity!”

“Great program that other local businesses can benefit from!”

While participants found most of the sessions useful, those that focused on business' most urgent needs during the pandemic were the most highly-rated

Individual Session Ratings



The sessions focusing on accessing emergency funds, business planning, and building a digital presence were the most useful to program participants—**89% or more rated them as moderately or extremely useful.**

Given that FoodLab Chicago began in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings are not surprising. AEO's research has found that accessing financial resources is the number one priority of small businesses across the country right now.

We also know that effective planning is critical for both accessing resources and being able to make the necessary shifts and pivots needed to stabilize, shift, and succeed. And, of course, having a digital presence is critical in these times where face-to-face interactions are limited.

What was the most valuable part of your experience participating in this program?



High Quality Information

Many participants expressed gratitude for the introduction to new concepts (menu engineering, costs plating) and strategies (set up of delivery service) that were immediately implementable. Minor modifications in operational efficiencies reaped huge benefits in either increased revenue or costs-savings – providing entrepreneurs with a sense of control and boost in confidence, motivation, and hope.



One-on-one Support

Having “go-to” food experts available to discuss individual challenges and serve as a sounding board was the most valuable part of their experience (for 4 of the 13 participants who responded to this question). These participants specifically referenced the help received from John or Eric, grateful for the individualized attention that they received and the feeling that they had someone “in the trenches” with them.

Beyond the 'technical support' received, two participants (interviewed) expressed how instrumental Devita and John were in contributing to their emotional well-being, as well as how 'the work' kept them accountable for taking actions to the benefit of their businesses.

"Devita soothed my soul."

"...it kept me sane...really did, it kept me on track."



Networking Opportunities

FoodLab Chicago's community-centric approach was incredibly valuable for several participants (4 of the 13 who responded to this question). Participants appreciated the ability to forge personal connections with other food businesses in their community that shared a similar mission.

Participants (interviewed) noted how the program highly encouraged and helped to overcome their fears in developing relationships with banks...so that when they needed financial assistance in the future, they are not building those relationships from scratch.

"Those were life and death times. Having those bankers come on the phone and ya know get involved at the level they got involved."



Business Outcomes

Post-program, participants felt like they had significantly more knowledge in most of the topical areas covered

At the conclusion of the program, all participants reported having at least a moderate level of knowledge in how to improve their credit and methods of keeping employees and customers safe during the pandemic.

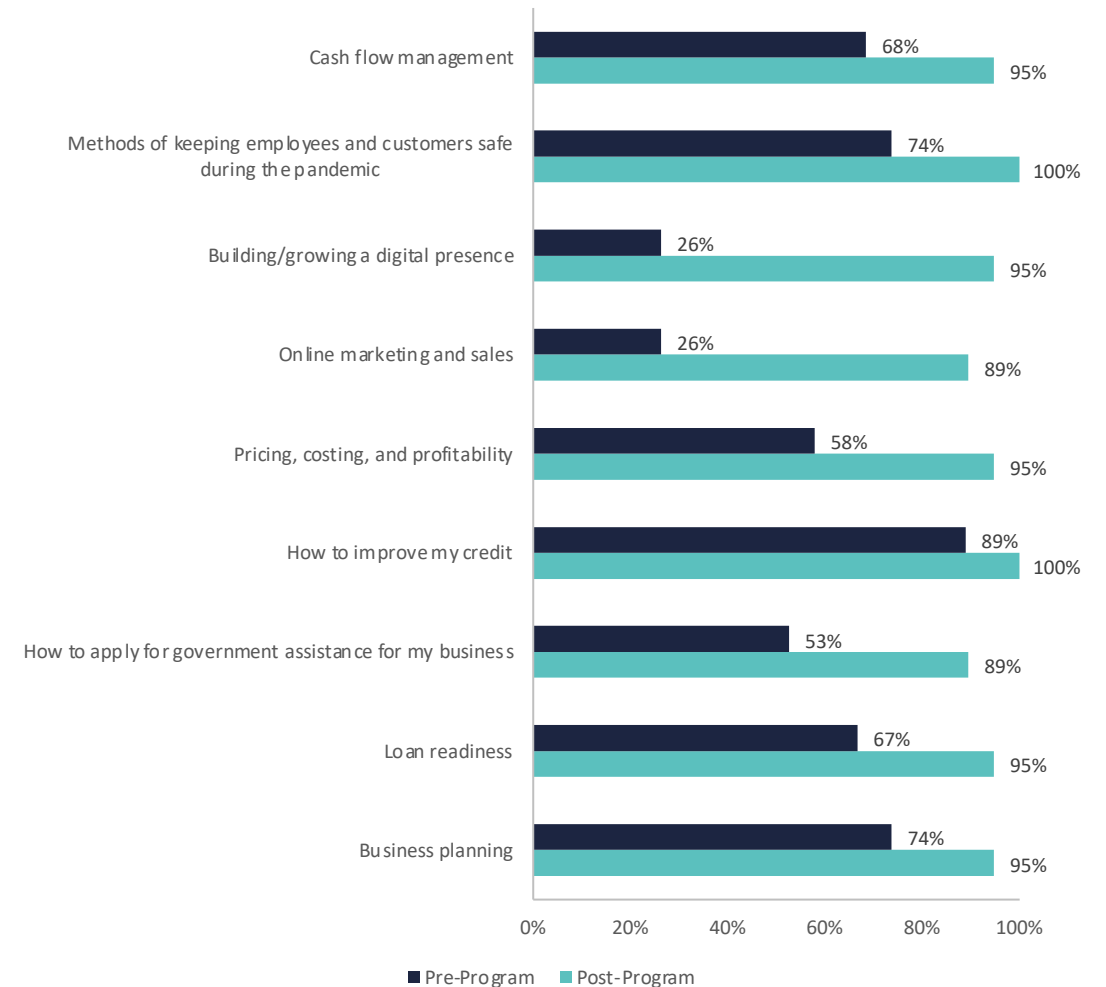
Participants *gained* the most knowledge, however, in the areas of building/growing a digital presence, online marketing and sales, pricing, costing, and profitability, and how to apply for government assistance for their business.

Interviewees further explained that the program went beyond improving their knowledge in the different content areas and really provided them with practical ideas and solutions that they could use in their business right then. At a time when businesses are having to constantly adjust to shifting circumstances, this was particularly critical.

"This wasn't the same old stuff. Went way deeper and from a point of view of it's implementable information. Not everyone is doing implementable information"

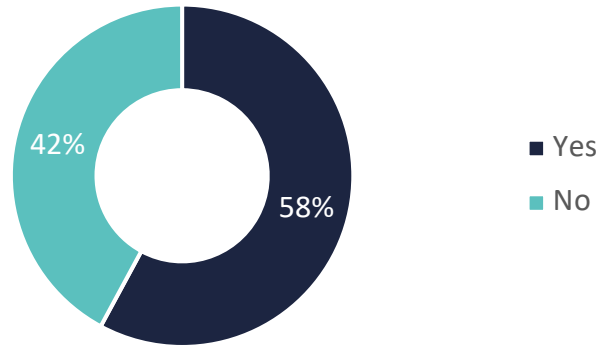
Some businesses, however, particularly those that were more established and in the growth stage, already had significant knowledge in many of the topical areas covered by the program. For these businesses, the program may not have offered as many opportunities for them to expand their knowledge, but these participants did note that the programming provided new ways for them to look at some of the challenges they've dealt with or reaffirmed for them that they were on the right track with how they were operating their business.

Share of participants with at least moderate business knowledge pre- and post-Program

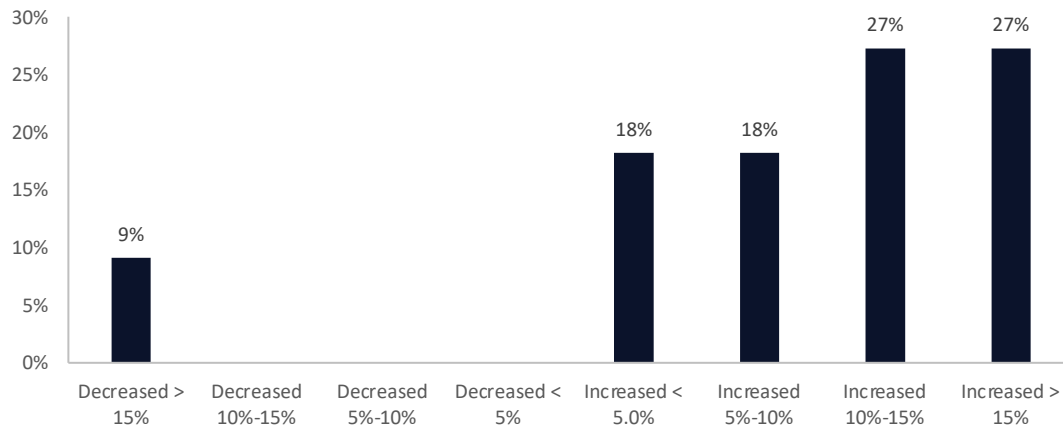


The pricing and menu engineering module was particularly helpful in helping participants think critically about their menus and make profitable adjustments

Post-Program Adjustments to Price



How much has your pricing changed post-Program?



Among program participants:

- 58% reported changing their pricing as a result of what they learned in the program.
- More than half increased their price by more than 10%, among those who did adjust their pricing.

The pricing/menu engineering module was highlighted among the participants interviewed as being incredibly helpful. Two interviewees indicated that they had either implemented or were in the process of implementing changes to their menus as a result of what they had learned. Of particular interest:

- One participant had previously kept their prices low out of a sense of obligation to the community, but with encouragement from the program is now shifting their pricing to reflect their “worth”.
- One participant mentioned adjusting their menus by focusing on top sellers and most profitable dishes while also reducing the number of selections.
- Another participant reported adjusting portion sizes to increase profit without raising prices.

These adjustments, while at times small on their own, really add up. One participant noted that even though she is open fewer days a week due to COVID, she has been able to bring in more revenue as a result of her pricing and menu changes.

"July and August of last year, my business was open seven days a week, which meant we worked 62 days. July and August of this year, we were only open five days a week [...] which means we work about 45 days. In those 45 days, we produced 47,000 more dollars...in COVID."

The program provided implementable ideas, tools, and solutions that helped businesses cut costs, generate revenue, and make other adjustments needed to stabilize and recover

Cost-Saving Adjustments

Cost-saving adjustments were among the most commonly adopted adjustments that businesses reported making as a result of what they learned in the program. In particular, a large share (68%) of participants reported working to improve operating efficiency (including cost of goods sold, food quality, and sustainability), 63% cut non-essential business expenses, and 42% reported working to reduce food waste, and improving operating efficiency.

When COVID-19 hit, many businesses cut their use of third-party delivery providers like Door Dash and Uber Eats to reduce overhead and retain as much revenue as possible. But as the program progressed, some businesses used knowledge gained in the program to reopen that revenue stream at a more profitable rate by negotiating lower percentage cuts with delivery providers and ensure the service was profitable.

Revenue-Generating Adjustments

By the end of the program, there was an increase in the number of businesses selling food or other products/services online (32%) and offering delivery/takeout/curbside pickup (26%), which generally resulted in increases in revenue among those who implemented these changes. In addition, a third of participants developed new ideas for products/services to sell.

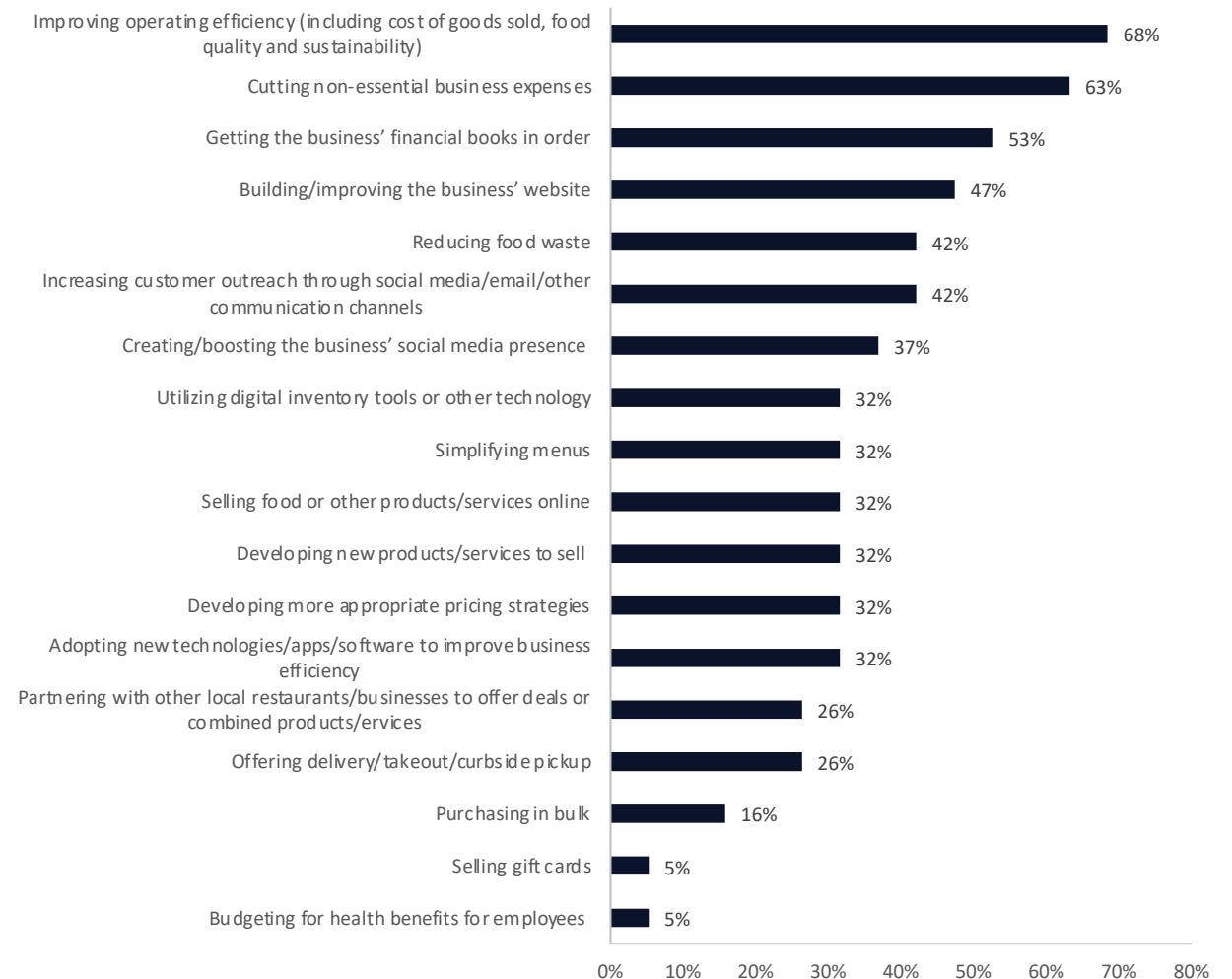
About 32% of businesses also reported simplifying their menus and/or developing more appropriate pricing strategies, which allowed businesses to focus on their most profitable plates/products and to price their products more competitively and in a way that maximizes their profits.

Other Adjustments

Operationally, respondents found the most value in their increasing/establishing a strong digital presence through their website (47%) and Social Media (37%). These adjustments helped facilitate the sale of products and services online as well as driving customer traffic to the business itself.

More than half of participants (53%) reported that the program helped them get the business' financial books in order, which can be instrumental in helping participants access funding for their businesses. Collaborative members reported that they were able to transition 13 businesses away from "checkbook accounting" to QuickBooks.

Cost-Saving, Revenue-Generating, and Other Adjustments Made as a Result of Program

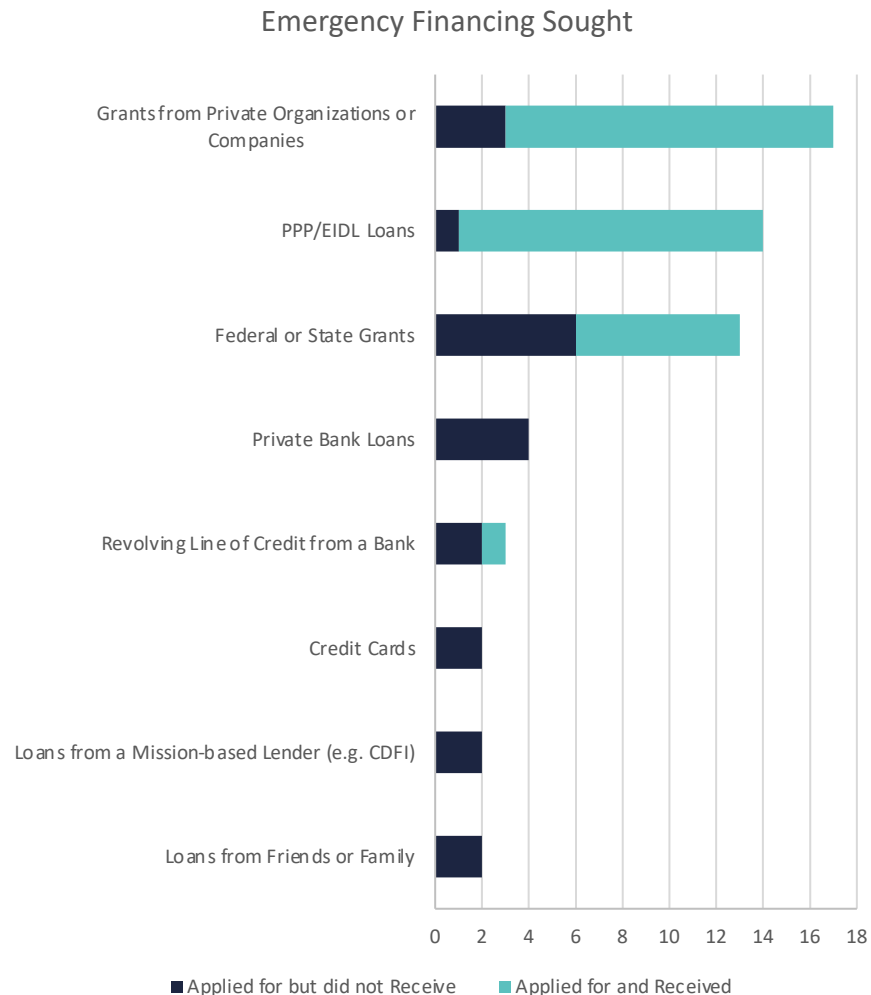


More generally, two growth-stage businesses shared how the program helped them to re-think their overall business strategy

"...things that we've learned from the class gives us more clarity in terms of 'how' to move forward [...] if we look at our company as a sculpture, maybe we had chipped it out halfway. I think going through the program helped us to chip out some more and give us a clearer vision of who we are and what we need to do to move forward."

"...I took the opportunity to use it [the program] as a guide that would also influence the culture for the next 10 years of my business. I spent a lot of time on my vision and mission which I would not have done."

The program helped participants access emergency funding totaling \$1.7 million



Note: Bar length represents the total number of participants who applied for each type of assistance. Colored segments represent the share of participants who applied who received/did not receive funding.

Not surprisingly, there was a great need for financial resources among participating businesses. Many participants initially struggled to access PPP/EDIL funds and other emergency funding because they didn't have their financial statements in order, didn't have payroll (gray economy), and/or relied solely on their checkbook register to manage the business.

Most participants applied for private and/or government-sponsored grants as well as PPP/EIDL loans with the help of the program.

- 79% of participants applying for PPP/EIDL loans reported receiving assistance from the program, as did 77% of those applying for federal or state grants, and 59% of those applying for private grants.
- The funding sources that participants received the most help in accessing were also those that participants had the greatest success with—93% were successful in accessing PPP/EIDL, 82% in accessing private grants, and 54% in accessing federal or state grants.
- Collectively the program helped to bring in \$1.7 million in emergency funding to the group.

Beyond alerting them to the different opportunities available, participants reported how the program helped them understand the importance of building relationships with financial institutions, noting that the introduction to banks was huge. In two of the four interviews we conducted, respondents said that they were now much more intentional about doing better around banking and building relationships with their banks.

"...that was something that was major for me and a wake-up call ...I went out and I opened up a new bank account with a bank that actually did give me the PPP and actually built an actual relationship with my banker. So that, that was one of the most helpful things for me."

More than half of program participants reported increases in the number of customers served per week

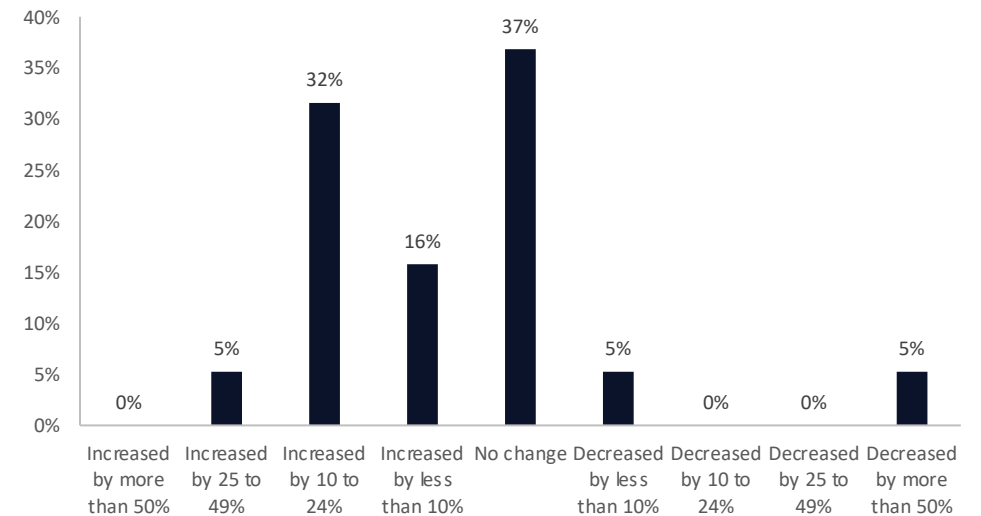
Relative to when they first started the program, 53% of participants saw increases in the number of customers served per week, while 37% saw no change, and just 10% continued to see numbers decrease.

A number of factors contributed to this trend toward stabilization including:

- 26% of participants partnered with other local businesses to offer customers deals or combined products/services to draw greater interest.
- 32% reported selling food or other products/services online, expanding the avenues through which the business could serve its customers.
- Some businesses reported adding flyers in takeout bags as a way to share their story with customers.
- Many businesses also stepped up their digital presence, with 47% reporting building/improving their website, 37% creating/boosting the business' social media presence, and 42% increasing customer outreach through a variety of channels.

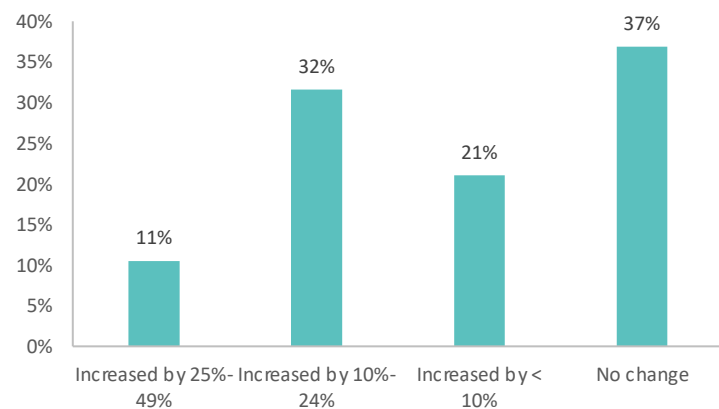
In addition to the challenges drawing customers to their businesses during the pandemic, one participant shared that it was difficult to get people to visit their business because the neighborhood isn't as vibrant as it could be. The city has recently stepped up to revitalize the neighborhood and to make it "the place to go" through its 75th Street Boardwalk initiative (described below).

Post-Program Change in Number of Customers Served per Week



Most participating businesses have been able to stabilize and/or grow their revenues and profit margins compared with their levels at the start of the program

Post-Program Change in Average Weekly Revenue



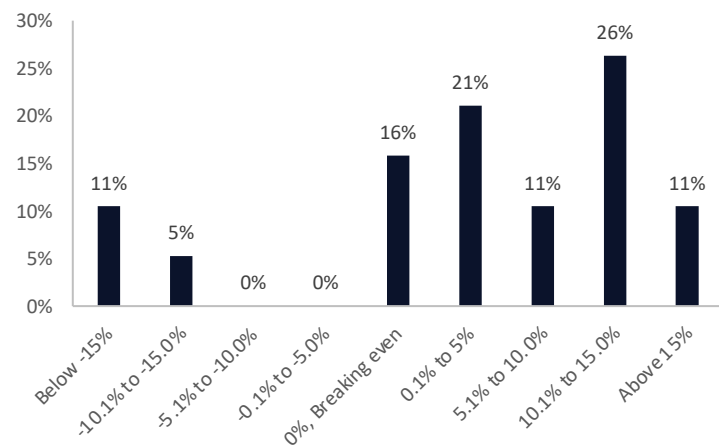
Collaborative members described how participants' revenues/sales overall were down significantly (57%) from their levels pre-COVID, but by August they had rebounded and were only down by 26%. Seven businesses had initially closed and since reopened. This stabilization and recovery was also observed in the post-program survey. Compared with the start of the program, no businesses saw decreases in revenue, 37% reported no change in revenue, and 63% reported increases in revenue.

Participants were optimistic that this trend of recovery would continue—74% said that they expected their revenues to increase beyond their current levels in the upcoming 12 months.

Participants' profit margins followed a trend similar to revenues. According to the collaborative members, prior to COVID, about two thirds of participating businesses were breaking even or profitable, but when COVID hit only one third remained profitable. Our post-program survey data indicates that program participants have been able to bounce back, with approximately 85% reporting breaking even or positive profits.

Collaborative members expressed confidence that based on this trajectory, all participating businesses are going to survive the year. In fact, a few of the businesses' revenues have exceeded their 2019 levels.

Current Monthly Profit Margin



In addition to the lifting of stay at-home orders, other factors contributing to these positive outcomes were identified by program participants and collaborative members:

- A collaborative neighborhood boardwalk initiative that expanded the outdoor seating space for businesses and brought more customers into the corridor
- Utilizing delivery services such as GrubHub and Uber Eats to continue bringing in revenue, as well as renegotiating percentage payouts with such services in order to increase the amount staying with the business
- Putting into practice what they learned about menu engineering, enabling them to boost productivity/profits despite being opened fewer hours (one business reported earning \$47,000 more from July-August in sales than the same period in 2019 as a result of these changes)

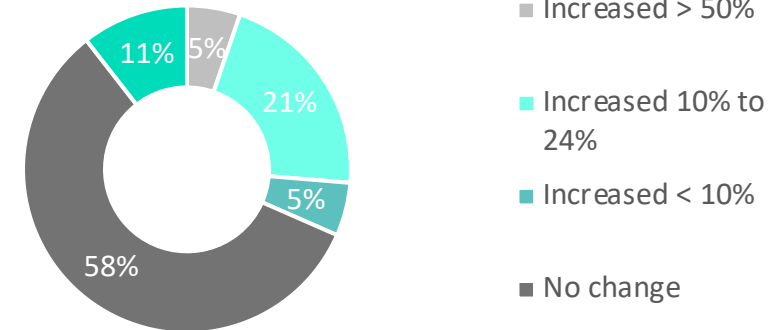
Post-program, most respondents reported either stable or increased employment levels compared with the start of the Program

Given the drastic and continued impact that COVID-19 has had on so many businesses, it is not surprising that for most participants (58%), employment levels remained unchanged relative to their levels at the beginning of the Program. For 36% of participants, however, employment levels have increased.

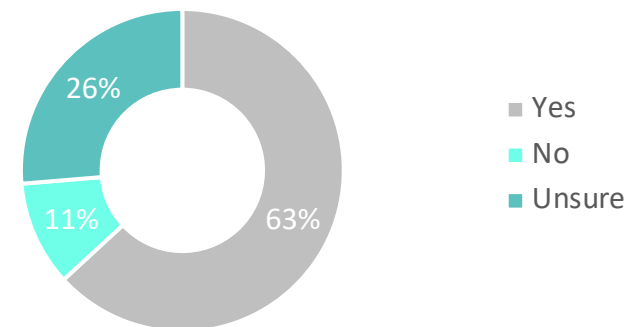
For some participants, forming and maintaining strong relationships with employees and building loyalty among staff was very important. One Program participant, for example, mentioned taking a second job during the pandemic so that they could continue to pay their employees.

Despite the challenges faced, participants are optimistic for the future. About 63% expect to increase their employment relative to current levels over the next 12 months. Another 26% are unsure whether they will grow their employment levels.

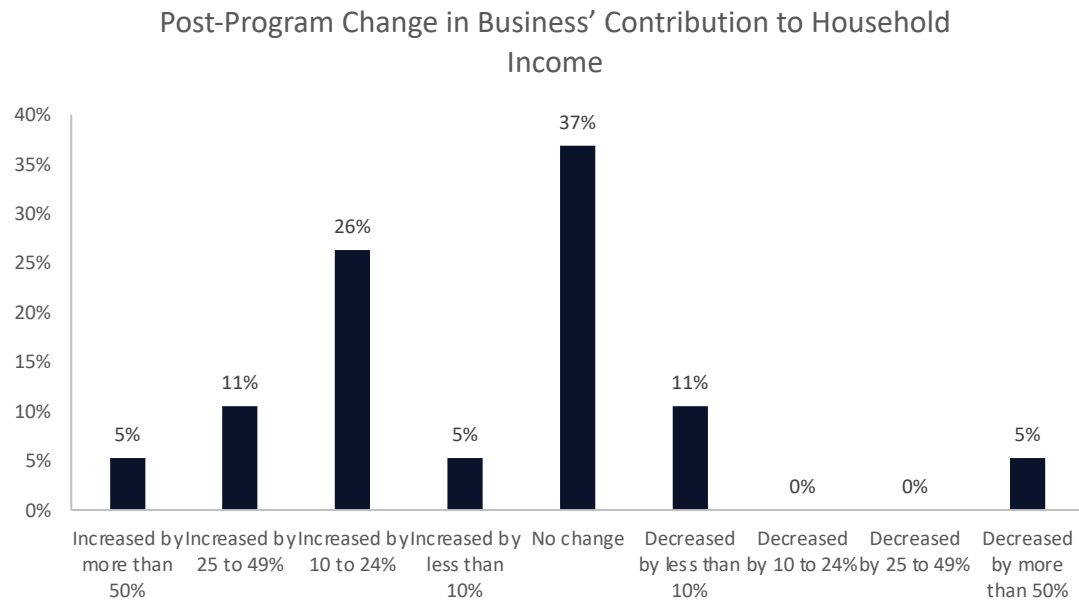
Post-Program Change in Employment



Do you expect to increase employment over the next 12 months?



On a more personal level, participants reported increases in their business' contribution to their household income as well as improvements in confidence and motivation



As a result of the increases in revenues and profit margins that participating businesses achieved, in part due to the information, guidance, and tools provided by the program, approximately half (47%) of participants also saw their business' contribution to their household income increase relative to when they first started the program.

Beyond the monetary benefits the program helped them achieve, participants also reported deep personal fulfillment from the program.

The businesses coming together as a whole was extremely important. Respondents praised the program for helping to build a safe, collaborative peer network where businesses could share experiences and ideas during a very difficult period.

Attending the weekly sessions helped respondents break out of their "panic paralysis".

Participants also appreciated the level of accountability that the program and coaches held them to, ensuring that they followed through on the advice and recommendations given

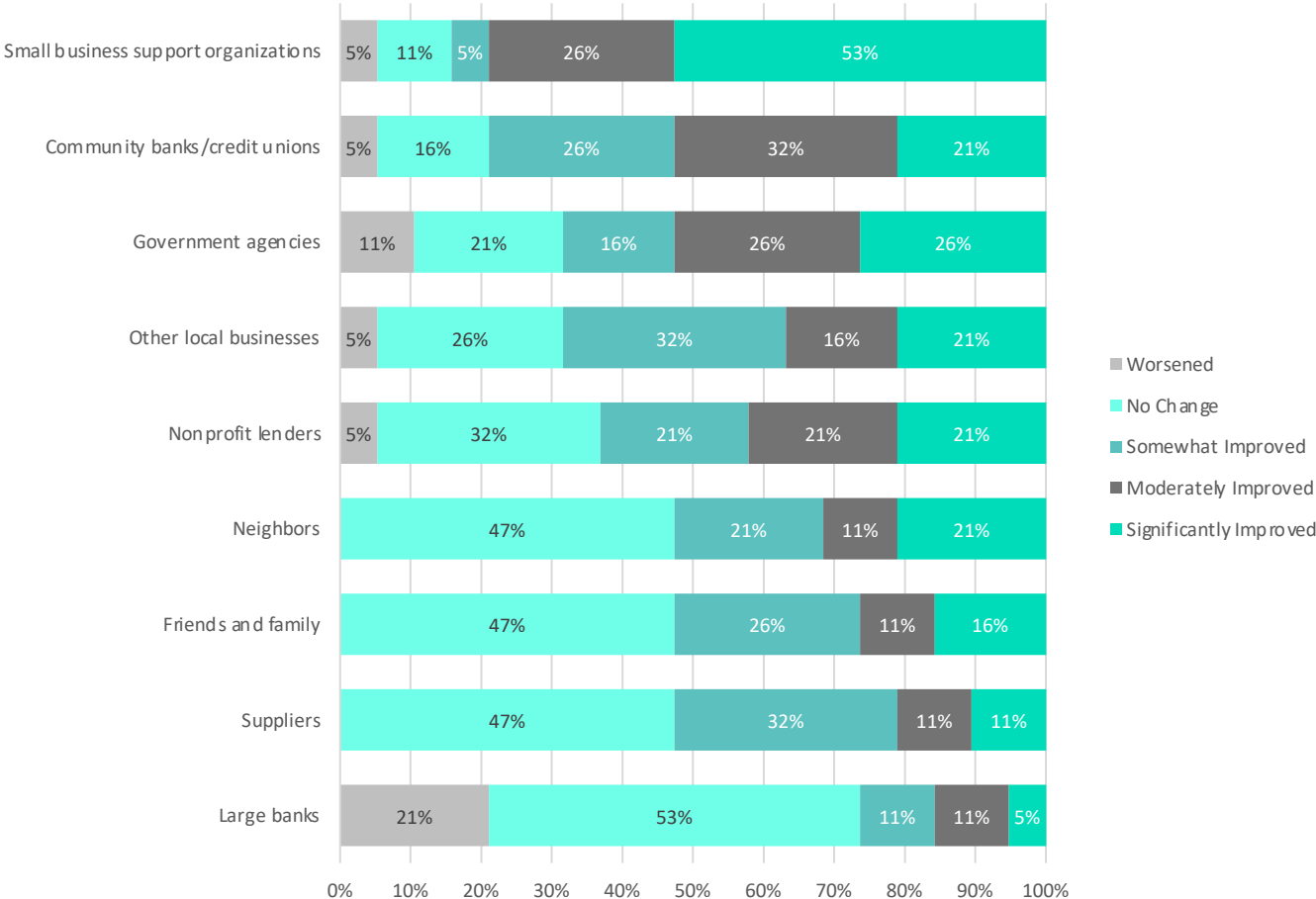
"I will tell you that one of the most life-saving strategies, and I say life-saving, was having the organizations come together during COVID. You know, our first meeting was canceled because of COVID. We had gone immediately into crisis mode, so to have the support, and to be honest, to soothe my soul... to have that kind of support because I closed my business down."

"[...]especially during COVID, I think it kept me sane, and really did keep me on track instead of fading away. Before FoodLab, being over on 75th street in general, you felt like you were on your own Island because you are constantly grinding away and working and staying in your four walls. You're trying to, you know, get out and meet and greet and things like that, but if you're working, it's kind of hard to do so. With FoodLab bringing about all these different restaurant owners, it was a platform that was easy to go out and to network. It was right there."

"So that whole thing with the 40 owners getting together on a weekly basis, sometimes I was just like, my mind hurts. I don't want any more zoom calls. I'm tired. [...] But in general, I made sure that I was in attendance for that, because it really kept me on track, moving forward instead of just staying still and kind of feeling sorry for myself."

Participation in the program helped build trust, particularly in community-based organizations

How has your participation in this Program changed how much you trust the below individuals, organizations, and institutions?



Small business support organizations, community banks and credit unions, and government agencies saw the biggest improvements in trust among participants, with 52% to 79% of participants reporting moderate or significant improvements. Participants cited a number of different factors that were instrumental in building their trust including the hands-on support and assistance that they received from coaches in the program, the opportunity to learn more about the different organizations and institutions through the program (directly from them) and having a safe space to openly talk about challenges and opportunities.

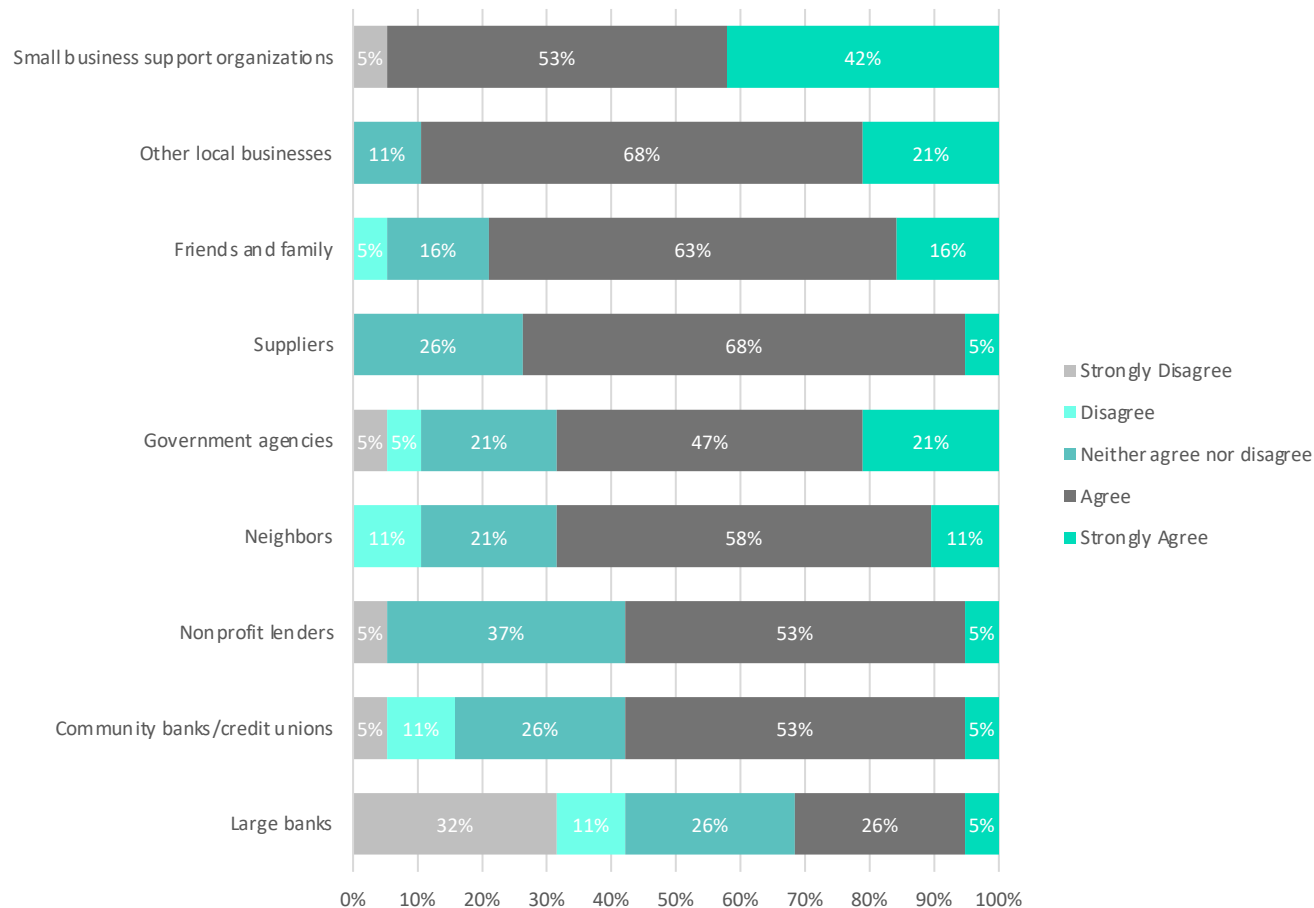
This improved trust resulted in several participants building and strengthening their relationships with their banks.

"It's changed my whole outlook on banking. I have 3 banking relationships. And Why? Somebody else might need to do something for me. And I need to not start that in a crisis. I'll never do that again. And that's huge."

In contrast, 21% of participants reported worsened trust in large banks. Some participants felt let down that they were only able to access PPP and not any other type of financial assistance, while others felt like these lending institutions were stepping up because they felt the social pressure to do so rather than because they genuinely wanted to help.

The majority of program participants feel that they will be treated fairly if they ask for assistance from different people and institutions in their community, with the exception of large banks

I will be treated fairly and be provided with the right information if I ask for assistance from...



Not surprisingly, participants report the most confidence that they will be treated fairly if they asked for assistance from local organizations and people from their community, particularly small business support organizations, other local businesses, and friends and family.

“Showing up” and being responsive contributed to participants’ perceptions they would receive fair treatment in approaching different individuals, organizations, and institutions for assistance.

Although one person shared "*see[-ing] a shift in larger organizations to put more skin on the game for minorities*," 43% 'disagree or strongly disagree' they would receive fair treatment at large banks.

Participants overwhelmingly said that there was nothing that the program could have done to improve their trust beyond what they already did, noting that it was really up to the organizations and institutions themselves to earn it.

Summary

The program was particularly effective in empowering businesses to make pivots and adjustments to their operations. This enabled them to stabilize/grow their revenues, which will eventually help the business owners themselves build wealth. It was also extremely successful in helping participants access emergency funding, though some participants did note that if it were not for the current situation, they likely would not have been able to access outside capital.

The program was successful in building participants' trust in more local organizations and institutions in their community, especially among the local banks who showed up and engaged in the program and with program participants. The program was less successful, however, in building participants' trust in other organizations and institutions. This was particularly true with respect to larger banks. Though participants noted that there was not much the program could have done to facilitate this, they noted that it was really up to the organizations/institutions themselves to show up and step up.



WEALTH:

- ✓ 69% of participating businesses are profitable, and with new concepts, strategies, and knowledge, hopefully increasingly so.
- ✓ 63% anticipate increasing employment levels over the next 12 months, helping to build wealth in their community.
- ✓ 47% experienced an increase in the business' contribution to household income relative to the start of the program.
- ✓ Keeping these well-established businesses (average 15-16 years) 'up and running' so they're able to pass the business and wealth down to future generations.



CREDIT:

- ✓ 14 out of 15 participants who applied for PPP received a loan in the second round of funding with encouragement and assistance from the program.
- ✗ Some program participants did express skepticism that this positive trend in accessing funding would continue, noting that if it weren't for the pandemic they likely would not be able to access capital.
- ✓ There was a disparity among participants in terms of who had financial statements available (required for loans) and those who did not. However, the program has worked with participants to leverage/increase their use of software to manage their books and inventory so that real-time statements are able to be easily generated.



TRUST:

- ✓ With the support of knowledgeable and trusted advisors, participants were encouraged to establish relationships with their (local) banks.
- ✗ Participants still lack trust in large banks and do not feel that they will receive fair treatment if they approach them for assistance.



Community Outcomes

75TH STREET BOARDWALK

on Restaurant Row

"Became the happening place where people wanted to come and frequent."

Repurposing plywood used to board up businesses in the wake of civil unrest this year, members worked with the City in creating a community space, launched in September 2020.

Complementary to the program, commitments were made to improve the storefronts lined up in what is known as 'restaurant row.' These efforts combined with local press coverage resulted in more customers attracted to the area, spurring economic growth and a sense of community.

Permits secured for 12 restaurants enabled critical outdoor dining areas and was a 'life-saver' - enabling some restaurants to surpass pre-pandemic revenues.

"It's a shock as you don't see this in Black communities...very welcomed."



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OPEN

Opportunities to Grow and Improve

SHOP SMALL
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BREAKFAST

LUNCH

CATERING

Recommendations



Identify and Leverage Creative Ways of Building Relationships in a Digital Environment

Strong relationships and support networks can help us navigate through even the most challenging times, emerging on the other side more resilient than ever. However, because 80% of communication is non-verbal, building trust and rapport with fellow participants, coaches, mentors, and other community partners can be difficult when it is done exclusively through digital mediums. To that end, two participants expressed that they felt they would have gotten more out of the program had it been face-to-face.

As the FoodLab Chicago program will be online for the foreseeable future, finding creative ways to promote organic networking and relationship-building opportunities in a digital environment is going to be critical.

Some ideas to explore could include having previous program “graduates” or other food business owners share their success stories to inspire and motivate current participants; increasing the frequency/length of breakout sessions.



Create More Specialized Content That Meets Participants Where They Are

A little over half (53%) of participants reported learning some of or most of what they expected to learn in the program, while 47% learned everything they expected, identifying a potential opportunity to better tailor the program's content to participant needs.

Several participants shared that the information presented was more of a confirmation of what they already knew and an affirmation that they were on the right track rather than new ideas and tools that they could implement in their business.

These participants offered up suggestions for how the program could be structured so that more businesses could benefit.

- Organizing cohorts and/or creating 'tracks' of content based on business lifecycle stage (start up, stay up, scale up).
- Offering a topic and diving deeper into its different aspects in breakout sessions that participants could self-select into based on their specific needs.



Provide Incentives for Participants to Remain Engaged and to Implement Learnings

Collaborative members observed that it was sometimes difficult to compete with the social, economic, and business-related distractions that participants were facing throughout the program.

To incentivize engagement for more mature businesses and to communicate belief in and build trust among businesses in the partner organizations and other partner institutions, future programs could add tangible opportunities for participants to access resources at the conclusion of the program. Examples could include grants, low-interest loans, marketing opportunities, and/or pitch contests.