



# SKILLS TRAINING: HERE, THERE, EVERYWHERE

## EMPLOYMENT EQUITY THROUGH EFFECTIVE & ACCESSIBLE TRAINING

January 2014

Two recent papers in our *Workforce Equity for a Competitive Economy* series emphasized the “demand” side of the employment equity equation: ideas for creating labor market opportunities, improving hiring and employment practices, and crafting economic development policies that ensure people of color have better access to their fair share of jobs. In this paper we turn to the “supply” side of the equation—human capital. Promoting access to “more and better” education and training for people of color is insufficient without also promoting job creation, placement, and retention strategies that are intentionally inclusive. There is simply too much bias (often unrecognized) in the labor market, from multi-million dollar economic subsidy deals to everyday hiring practices, so other strategies are needed to level the playing field, ensuring that all job candidates and workers, regardless of race, are equally educated and well trained.

That said, there is no doubt that access to high quality, relevant education and training are imperative to all workers’ labor market prospects, and that “skilling up” an increasingly diverse workforce is critical to economic growth and competitiveness in the Twin Cities. From an equity perspective, the question becomes not only how to build an education and training system that is more accessible, affordable, and efficient, but how to develop a large-scale workforce delivery system in concert with job creation strategies that offer the greatest promise for shared opportunity and prosperity.

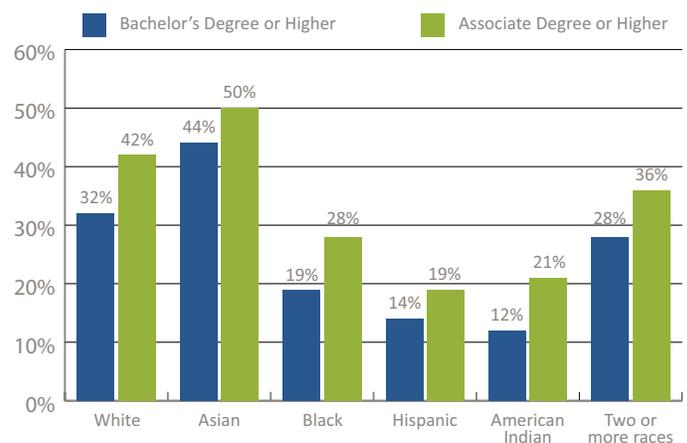
This paper will explore several of the many promising practices in the delivery of workforce training already taking place in Minnesota that, taken to greater scale, could provide inroads to the labor market for more people of color. It will also look at some new ideas for improving access to a range of education and training opportunities.

### THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE AND THE LEAKY GAS TANK

In the coming decade, 70 percent of jobs in Minnesota will require education beyond high school. Yet today only 40 percent of working-age adults in the state possess a postsecondary degree—a group that is disproportionately white.<sup>1</sup> The chart to the right shows blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians lagging far behind Asians and whites in degree completion at both the associate and bachelor’s levels.

The racial gap in educational attainment will have serious consequences for the economy. As the (mostly white) baby boom generation begins to retire in large numbers, employers will rely on the state’s increasingly diverse population to fill its jobs. People of color make up the fastest growing segment of the state’s population; in the Twin Cities, people of color will grow from 24 percent of the metro area’s overall population in 2010 to a projected 43 percent by 2040.<sup>2</sup>

**Minnesota Degree Attainment for Population Age 25 and Older, by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, 2007-2010

1 Carnevale, A. P. et al. (2010). Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

2 Metropolitan Council. (2012, April). What Lies Ahead: Population, Household and Employment Forecasts to 2040. St. Paul: Metropolitan Council.

We must adapt and improve our education and training systems so that our increasingly diverse workforce is equipped with the skills needed to keep our economy competitive and to share in the fruits of its labor. This means working in earnest to address the issues that keep too many adults from pursuing or completing education beyond high school. The high tuition of many postsecondary programs (see box), family and work obligations, unmet childcare needs, limited or unreliable transportation, academic insecurity, and lengthy remedial education prerequisites are among the obstacles to participating in or completing higher education.

For untold numbers, these circumstances prove daunting enough to dissuade entering a postsecondary program in the first place. For those who do enroll, meeting work, family, financial, and other obligations—along with academic responsibilities—can be overwhelming. As Winona State University professor Darrell Downs recounted recently, he has been a state university professor for more than twenty years, and he’s seen firsthand how students struggle with college costs and working part-time jobs. He notes “what should be an exciting time of personal growth can become a time of debilitating stress and depression due to the prospect of repaying huge student loans.”<sup>3</sup>

At greatest risk for non-completion are students of color, first generation college students, those with limited English language proficiency, and returning adult students—precisely the groups upon which our workforce will be most reliant in the coming years.<sup>4</sup> Persistence rates at the nation’s two-year community colleges, which serve a disproportionate share of students from these backgrounds, are telling. For example, 35 percent of students who enrolled in two-year colleges in 2003 had left school without completing a degree by 2006, and were not enrolled anywhere else (by contrast, only 13 percent of students who enrolled at four-year institutions in 2003 had left without completing by 2006).<sup>5</sup>

In Minnesota, statistics are similar. The persistence rate from the first year to the second year for students who attend two-year institutions (57 percent) is substantially lower than the rate for students who attend four-year institutions (78 percent). Further, graduation rates are highly stratified by race: while 63 percent of white students enrolled in the state’s four-year institutions graduate within six years, just 37 percent of black students and 51 percent of Hispanic students do so. And only 16 degrees are awarded for every 100 students of color in the state, while among white students, 21 degrees are awarded for every 100 students. This is one of the largest gaps in the country.<sup>6</sup>

### RISING TUITION RATES IN MINNESOTA

Over the last few decades, college tuition has risen dramatically. In Minnesota, average tuition and fees at public two- and four-year institutions increased from 1999-2000 to 2011-12, by an annual average of 8.6 percent and 6.9 percent respectively. Average tuition and fees in 2011-12 were higher than the national average at both two- and four-year public institutions.

- Minnesota public 2-year institutions = \$5,170
- National average = \$3,380
- Minnesota public 4-year institutions = \$9,460
- National average = \$7,180

*Source: Minnesota Measures: 2012 Report on Higher Education Performance, MN Office of Higher Education*

3 Downs, Darrell. (2013, September 23). “MnSCU’s reform efforts omit key priorities.” *MinnPost*. Minneapolis: MinnPost.

4 The National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Descriptive Summary of 2003–04 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Three Years Later*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

5 Ibid.

6 National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2008). *Measuring Up 2008: The State Report Card on Higher Education, 2008*. San Jose, California: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Note that the data include both public and private institutions.

These figures represent lost opportunities for individuals and lost economic capacity for our region. Like a leaky gas tank, we are losing fuel for a growing economy. The demographics will march forward regardless of the policy choices we make regarding education, training, and job creation. Our challenge then is to make choices designed to keep more “gas in the tank;” to move an increasingly diverse workforce successfully through education and training to productivity in the labor market.

## A BETTER APPROACH: CAREER PATHWAYS

Our education and training systems need to adapt to meet the needs of a student body that looks very little like “traditional” college students: young, predominantly white and comparatively well-off students pursuing four-year degrees, without child rearing or full-time work obligations of their own. Instead, our systems must accommodate adult students who are often also working, raising children, struggling with finances, lacking reliable transportation to and from school, or stretched thin by other demands. Often, these are students who want a relatively quick return on their investment: a degree or certificate that leads to steady employment and decent wages.

There are a number of fairly new innovations in education and training programming designed to do just that. At the forefront is an overarching strategy known as “career pathways” training, in which student-workers access skills training at multiple points along an occupational trajectory—from basic literacy and math skills to advanced technical training—“stacking” credentials as they choose to advance their careers in (preferably) high-demand growth industries and occupations. Career pathways programs generally arise from collaboration among employers, community colleges, nonprofit service providers, and workforce development professionals, working together to fill occupational shortages and provide good jobs within industries and occupations identified as important to the local economy. Minnesota FastTRAC (Training, Resources and Credentialing) is perhaps our best known homegrown example of career pathways programming.

### SPOTLIGHT ON MINNESOTA FastTRAC

MN FastTRAC Adult Career Pathway programs are on 29 MnSCU campuses, training students for careers in industry sectors important to the state economy: healthcare, manufacturing, education, business, energy, and more.

As of December 2012, Minnesota FastTRAC programs have served more than 1,900 adults.

- 88% of these adults received an industry recognized credential or earned credits toward that credential.
- 69% of these adults had success either gaining employment and/or continuing into further career pathway education.

Initial employment analysis of FastTRAC is available on a limited data set of program graduates; as of May 2012, 70% entered employment and 61% retained employment for 6 months.

*For more information, visit: [www.mnfasttrac.org](http://www.mnfasttrac.org)*

Career pathways programs are designed to minimize the time it takes for adult students to earn industry-recognized credentials that pay off in the labor market. FastTRAC, like a number of other career pathways programs, accomplishes this by integrating vocational and basic skills instruction. Rather than requiring students to spend (often considerable) time in basic or remedial education courses before they can pursue occupational training, FastTRAC combines the two. Under this model, Adult Basic Education and community college instructors together teach courses that weave foundational math and literacy skills into occupational training. In addition, career pathways programs typically offer a range of support services to students, helping them to overcome the academic and personal challenges that can make staying in school difficult. Often these services are provided by community-based organizations working in conjunction with educational institutions.

Because of their emphasis on preparing students for jobs in growing industries, career pathways programs are optimally run with ongoing input from local employers, and may be part of a broader “sector strategy.” Employers provide educators with essential, up-to-date guidance on occupational demands, curriculum development, and requisite skill sets, and offer students job shadowing, worksite training opportunities, and mock interviews. Ideally, employers offer jobs to well-prepared program graduates, who may continue to upgrade their skills as incumbent workers looking for advancement.

Experts in the field concur that there are a number of key elements common to successful career pathways programming. The table below shows core components developed by the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP), MDRC, and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). Taken together, these components reflect a broad consensus around what makes career pathways work.<sup>7</sup>

CLASP	MDRC	NCSALL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple entry points, e.g., from adult education, ESL programs, workforce training, and not simply through high school</li> <li>• Innovations in program content and delivery, e.g., flexible scheduling, contextualization, integration of bridge programs</li> <li>• Sequence of education and training leading to credentials with value in the labor market</li> <li>• Support services (provided by community organizations, community colleges, and/or other organizations)</li> <li>• Strong role for employers in pathway development, worksite training, and contribution of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic guidance and counseling, including course planning and graduation requirements</li> <li>• Flexible course delivery, including modular, online, and accelerated programming</li> <li>• Academic supports, like tutoring, time management, and study skills training</li> <li>• Career counseling, including occupational aptitude and labor market information</li> <li>• Personal guidance and counseling, such as mental health counseling or crisis intervention for at-risk students</li> <li>• Peer supports, including learning communities, student mentoring, and social integration programs like extended orientation courses and multicultural centers</li> <li>• Integrated work and learning opportunities</li> <li>• Supplemental services, such as childcare or transportation assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple levels of instruction</li> <li>• Teaching and learning of basic education and technical skills that are contextualized around a specific employment sector</li> <li>• Curriculum that is “chunked” into clear steppingstones that are recognized by employers and articulate to academic and career advancement pathways</li> <li>• Intensive support services tailored to the expected challenges of the specific pathway (e.g., intensive support in math and sciences for high-tech careers)</li> </ul>

<sup>7</sup> Center on Law and Social Policy. (2010). *Funding Career Pathways and Career Pathways Bridges*. Washington DC: CLASP; MDRC. (2006); MDRC. (2004). *Support Success: Services that may Help Low-income Students Succeed in Community College*. New York: MDRC; National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. (2006, December). *Transitioning Adults to College: Adult Basic Education Program Models*. Boston: NCSALL.

## CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Offering credit for non-college or experience-based skills and competencies acquired from work and life is another important strategy for helping adults progress towards credentials along a career pathway. Credit for prior learning may be part of a given career pathways program, or it may be a stand-alone policy at a college or university or within a particular department or program. Regardless, there is growing recognition that credit for prior learning is an important strategy for moving non-traditional adult students to degree/credential completion. In fact, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (MnSCU) requires each of its institutions to establish procedures for evaluating and assigning credit to work or experiential learning (see box for an example from Inver Hills Community College).

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) describes Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) as the process by which colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom (or from non-college instructional programs), including employment, military training and service, travel, hobbies, civic activities, and volunteer service.

A recent study of the records of more than 62,000 students age 25 or older at 48 colleges and universities who enrolled in 2001-2002. The study, which followed students' academic progress over the course of seven years, found that PLA students had greater persistence, higher graduation rates, and earned degrees more quickly than other adult students; more than half (56%) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so.<sup>8</sup>

Further, the CAEL study revealed that graduation rates for PLA students were higher than non-PLA students in every racial/ethnic group. This was especially true for Hispanic PLA students, who were nearly eight times more likely to earn bachelor's degrees than non-PLA Hispanic students. In addition, both Hispanic and black PLA students saw reductions in average time to degree with black PLA students seeing the most dramatic decreases. The study also found that

### INVER HILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE: ADULT SUCCESS THROUGH ACCELERATED PROGRAM

In an effort to boost retention and graduation rates, Inver Hills Community College launched ASAP. In the mold of career pathways programs, ASAP is designed for adult students looking to earn a degree quickly in a format that accommodates full-time work and/or family and other responsibilities. ASAP offers 8-week courses that meet at various locations in the metro region one night a week or on Saturdays.

Integral to the program are two introductory, for-credit courses. In "Educational Planning and Assessment," students develop educational goals and an individualized degree plan based on their career ambitions. In "Prior Learning Assessment Development," students are taught how to identify learning gained outside the classroom with competencies associated with specific college courses. Students outline equivalent competencies in written papers, with input from the course instructor.

If students are able to demonstrate skills and knowledge commensurate with course content and learning objectives, they receive academic credit without having to take the course. Granting credit for prior learning not only helps students earn credits toward a degree quickly, but saves them money: the cost per PLA credit is \$100, significantly less than average credit hour costs for courses.

<sup>8</sup> Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2010). *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*. Chicago: CAEL.

financial aid recipients with PLA credit and remedial students with PLA credit had higher graduation rates than their non-PLA counterparts.<sup>9</sup> The positive outcomes for black and Hispanic students with PLA credit show that this process of granting credit for skills and knowledge could be a key way to help these adult populations succeed in postsecondary institutions.

## OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING AT MULTIPLE VENUES

While colleges and universities are the epicenter of our workforce delivery system, there are other important venues for delivering relevant skills training to nontraditional students. The Twin Cities are home to a number of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that provide excellent short-term, industry-recognized certificate training at no cost to the student. This is critical, given that, even with financial aid, college expenses are prohibitive for many potential students. Goodwill/Easter Seals alone offers industry-recognized certificate training in seven fields: automotive, banking, construction, customer service call center, financial operations, medical office, and retail. Occupational certificates such as these should be considered a valid entry point along a continuum of career pathway training, with credit given to students who decide to pursue additional training in a postsecondary program.

In addition to, or in conjunction with CBO-based industry-certificate programs, some local Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs have begun to offer occupational training to students pursuing a GED—which, like a high school diploma, is critical for entry into the labor market but doesn’t command many skilled jobs or high wages these days. Accessing occupational training alongside or integrated with GED preparation can significantly enhance students’ employment options.

The Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning in St. Paul, for example, offers a number of occupational preparation courses—many of them designed as entry points to further skills training students will need to continue in the career path, but others, like the ServSafe Food Safety Class and Retail/Customer Service Literacy, provide learners with employment-ready certificates. Still other ABE programs around the country offer “contextualized GED” courses. Like the blending of basic and technical skills instruction that happens under FastTRAC, contextualized GED instruction integrates the academic skills students need to pass the GED exam with career or occupational knowledge. Students may exit these programs with their GED and an occupational or employment readiness certificate in hand.

There are other publicly-supported options that, if improved, could open more career doors. Minority hiring requirements attached to public housing and transportation projects, in particular, can be good on-ramps into well-paying construction jobs. Yet there often is a lack of real enforcement of contractors’ “good faith efforts” to meet hiring goals. (St. Paul and Minneapolis, with help from community advocates like HIRE Minnesota, have done a good job enforcing minority hiring goals tied to recent major projects including the Central Corridor light rail line and the new Vikings stadium.) Further, when these hires are made, it is often for short-term construction jobs without a genuine connection to the workforce development or registered apprenticeship systems, which can provide the additional training needed to lead to permanent, well-paying employment.

## ADVANCING AND STRENGTHENING SPECIFIC POLICY SOLUTIONS

Clearly, there are a number of avenues people can take to obtain the skills and credentials they need to compete in the labor market. From an equity perspective, the career pathways model is central to this web of education and training offerings because it is purposefully designed to be accessible to historically disadvantaged students and it reflects the realities of a contemporary labor force in which adults move between jobs, and attendant training, throughout their careers. Going forward, Minnesota policymakers,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

business leaders, educators, and service providers should continue to foster “stackable” credential skills training that is aligned with market needs and offered in multiple venues. Toward this end, we offer these specific policy solutions:

### **Strengthen Credit for Prior Learning**

The MnSCU system has made good progress in developing Prior Learning Assessment processes and legitimizing its use. However, work remains to be done to ensure credit for prior learning is accepted more universally and fluidly across colleges and programs of study. MnSCU institutions should look to examples like Adult Success through Accelerated Programs (ASAP) at Inver Hills Community College as a model for how to help students navigate the PLA process, and to embed it as part of a broader strategy for accelerating adult students’ time to degree completion.

### **Foster Occupational Training at Multiple Venues**

If our compelling need is to reach current and future workers who are not obtaining training through traditional pathways, then the market space should be expanded to reach those workers where they are. This includes supporting myriad training programs at various CBOs, fostering an expansion of certificate training through ABE, and strengthening public sector jobs programs (i.e.; stronger enforcement of hiring goals). It also means encouraging efforts to link certificates and skills obtained in these programs to postsecondary degree programs and other advanced training opportunities. Further, skills acquired on the job through customized training programs should likewise apply to credit-bearing degree programs.

### **Support Competency-Based Expectations for Workforce Training**

Fostering an education and training system in which adults can acquire marketable skills in any number of venues requires some standardization of expectations. There is a push among educators and industry groups to clearly define skill sets, or competencies, for specific occupations that students must master regardless of the training provider they choose. For example, industry-based skills competencies in manufacturing<sup>10</sup> and nursing<sup>11</sup> have been incorporated into training efforts at Minnesota postsecondary institutions and community-based service providers. In addition, there are a growing number of online venues offering free or low-cost academic content and industry skills that can provide students with credit through the PLA system. The more clearly we can define competencies, the better informed students will be about the expectations associated with a chosen field of work. This is important, as the landscape of work shifts dramatically from industry/firm-based to occupation/skill-based, in which individuals act as their own agents.<sup>12</sup> Workers will need to be equipped to navigate an increasingly complex market space of employment.

### **Create a Statewide Education and Training Affordability and Accessibility Program**

Related to the idea that there are myriad ways to both acquire and recognize job skills, we propose a new education “point system” for Minnesota in which individuals would accumulate points based on their work history. These points would then be redeemable for education and training in an attempt to level the playing field for all working Minnesotans regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or geography, and to create a mechanism by which we are publicly encouraging lifelong learning relevant to workforce needs. As envisioned, the program would be universally available and marketed widely to all Minnesotans, with an outreach effort intended to elevate the importance of continuing education and training for every worker.

10 Since 2010, Hennepin Technical College and others have offered manufacturing/metalforming classes that include testing in accordance with the National Institute of Metalworking Skills (NIMS), an industry-based accreditation program built on defined skills for various levels of advancement in the industry.

11 The health care core curriculum developed through HealthForce Minnesota is a modularized, competency-based training program for entry-level learners pursuing direct care occupations.

12 Belz, Adam. (2013, September 4). *Star Tribune*, “‘Free agent’ is new face of Minnesota workforce,” reports: “Eighty percent of large companies plan to substantially increase their use of contract and temporary workers, according to Intuit, a software firm that publishes reports on the small business economy.”

## SUMMARY: MORE & BETTER SKILL TRAINING OPTIONS

We find ourselves in a quandary going forward: we are moving inescapably toward a workforce that is predominantly non-white, significantly immigrant-based, and reliant on those who have historically not been very successful at entering and advancing in the job market. To be economically competitive as a state, we'll need to maximize the human capital of all our people—particularly those whom our education and training systems have not reached before.

Further, the “new normal” is a labor market view that is segmented by occupation and industry and that allows workers to pick up skills along the way, in and out of the workplace. Education and training must be more modular, competency-focused, and accessible to all. Workers need better access, some financial incentive and assistance, and a broad view of the labor market, supplemented with good career information. Taken together, the recommendations here will help address the “leakage” of people from the workforce preparation pipeline because the necessary education and training is out of reach, incomplete, or insufficient to satisfy employer needs. Implemented successfully, we see these recommendations maximizing the growth potential for Minnesota’s economy while also providing significant opportunity for greater equity of advancement and prosperity for Minnesota workers.

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