Career Pathways are an innovative approach to job training that show great promise for addressing both racial disparities and the looming shortages of skilled labor in Minnesota.
LARRY WILLIAMS lays it on the table right off the bat. He made some bad choices as a youth, among them a foolish joyride in a stolen car at the age of 18, leading to a felony conviction when he lived in Chicago. And he made other missteps that set him back about a decade, he figures, on starting a good career.

“I didn’t have a model childhood,” he says, “but it’s not where you’re from, it’s what you’re doing now.” And what he’s doing now is finally paying off debt and child support and getting a firm footing with a new career operating heavy machinery.

After serving his time in Illinois, Williams, now 36, first came to Minnesota in 2002 at the age of 22. He had no diploma, no job prospects and a new baby to support, but he had ambitions and some innate skill. He knew he had a knack for all things mechanical and had worked on cars and hustled jobs at car lots throughout his youth and in his 20s. He dreamed of becoming a mechanical engineer or an architect, and still aspires to owning his own business.

But Williams ran afoul of the law in Minnesota too, mostly by not paying traffic tickets, and at one point he threw a citation out the window in the presence of a policeman. That fracas earned him time at a correctional facility in Shakopee and thousands of dollars in fines. Along the way, however, he sought and found work, mostly low-paying temporary jobs with no benefits. He worked for a while with a company that installed ceilings, moved to Milwaukee for a spell, and was getting by - but definitely not getting ahead.

Then he got to know a contractor who told him about Summit Academy OIC, an accredited vocational school that has long been considered a bright spot and one of the more successful routes out of the prevalent poverty on Minneapolis’ North Side. Williams checked out Summit’s “infomercial” and entered the program in 2012. He was interested in electrician and carpentry tracks at first, but heavy equipment was particularly appealing, even though he had lost his driver’s license.

“It was a struggle, going through the training and trying to support five kids, but things really didn’t start looking up for me until I got in this program.” With the credentials and basic employability skills he picked up at Summit, Williams got a job operating pile-driving equipment that paid him more than $24 an hour, with benefits. Over the last few years, overcoming layoffs and one harsh experience with a supervisor who Williams said was racially biased, he persevered. In April of 2015, he landed a job with VEIT Construction, his current employer, as an apprentice equipment operator.

Williams, who for years was living in friends’ houses, is now looking to buy a home, has a driver’s license and a car, is catching up on child support, and is working on the expungement of his criminal record. “I’m in a lot better place.”

EMMANUEL TALAVERA is on the front lines of Minnesota’s effort to rebuild and reinvest in our transportation infrastructure. On a recent sunny morning, he was part of the crew repainting and sprucing up the brown-and-tan sound barriers along Interstate 694 where it intersects Interstate 35E in the northeastern Twin Cities suburbs.

Talavera was born in New York City and is of Puerto Rican ancestry. He moved around with his single mother in his youth, ending up in Minnesota for good in the early 1990s. He attended public schools in St. Paul and Minneapolis, but dropped out of Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis.

Like Williams, Talavera, 30, has been in various stages of trouble and going nowhere in his career since his high school days. “I was young and hanging out with
the wrong crowd, in trouble at home and with the law,”
Talavera says.

And like so many young men of color in recent years,
Talavera ended up behind bars on drug charges, and
served time at a “boot camp” facility at Willow River/
Moose Lake. But at least he got a GED there and picked
up some skills in a carpentry program.

For several years he struggled to survive on low-
paying jobs and seasonal part-time work. “I was
making enough just to get by and barely support my
family, but I had no benefits and no real future,” Talavera said. He was
typically making $12 an hour. That
wasn’t nearly enough, with three
children to support. Separated from
their mother, Talavera spends every
other weekend with his kids. Their
well-being is a motivating factor for
him.

In January of 2016, at El Burrito
Mercado grocery story on St. Paul’s
West Side, Talavera saw a flyer about
a Career Pathway program. He was instantly intrigued
and had a feeling that he was on to something. The
flyer promised training in drywall and painting, known
as a finishing trade, and a likely job as an apprentice
at good wages. The program was a state-of-the art
Career Pathway partnership between contractors, a
union training institute, and a social service nonprofit
that serves Latino and Spanish-speaking Minnesotans.

Talavera figured he might be able to meet the
requirements of the program and complete the work
required because he had knocked about in various
construction trades for a decade and had picked up
some experience in residential framing, but he had no
credentials or certificates. Sure enough, he thrived
in the program, completing all the requirements in
the two-stage, nine-week training regimen, and was
hired right away by Swanson & Youngdale, one of
Minnesota’s larger commercial and industrial painting
contractors.

Now Talavera is earning $17.43 an hour as a finishing
trade apprentice with union membership, and he has
his eyes set on journeyman status and $30 an hour in
three years. “I would not be here if it weren’t for this
program,” he says with a big smile. “They told me if I
showed up and did the work, there would be a good
job. And here I am.”

Both Williams and Talavera are catching up fast now
and what they had in common was the discovery of an
emerging Career Pathway model in Minnesota, a holistic
employer-driven approach that equips Minnesotans
who face tough odds with in-demand skills and higher
education credentials, launching them on careers that
pay a livable wage. The Career Pathway model holds
great promise for addressing two of Minnesota’s most
pressing problems: widening racial disparities and
looming labor shortages for skilled workers as Baby
Boomers retire.

Williams, an African American, and Talavera, a
Latino, happen to be young men from the two
largest and fastest-growing Minnesota communities
of color.

And on all the bar graphs that show
inequality and disparity, those two
groups are represented by the shortest
bars. The State Demographer and a
myriad of other sources show African
Americans and Latinos, along with
Native Americans, as furthest behind on
a host of measures, from kindergarten
readiness to postsecondary attainment
to, inevitably, income and wealth.

If many above-average white Minnesota
youths start out at first, second or
third base, Williams and Talavera each
started out behind in the count, with
disadvantages that are typical for children born and
reared in poverty. A key feature of the programs that
launched them is that they are completely tuition-free,
and many pathfinders are able to receive various forms
of public assistance as they train.

Many of these emerging Career Pathway programs
focus on disadvantaged families without respect to
race. Many others, such as Summit Academy OIC, where Williams found his way, on Minneapolis’ North
Side, and Communidades Latinos Unidos en Servicio (Latino Communities United in Service, or CLUES),
where Talavera landed, put a special focus on specific
communities of color. A big part of Minnesota’s racial
disparity problem, experts agree, is white domination
of the trades and no entry ramps for people of color.

"I was making enough just to get by and barely support my family, but I had no benefits and no real future."
PART II: THE PATHMAKERS

**THE PATHWAYS** for Williams and Talavera and hundreds of other young adults are being blazed through a maze of existing and overlapping education and training programs. The pathmakers who have charted the way say development of this model has taken years of careful design and remarkable cooperation by employers, state, federal and local government officials, educators and trainers, and nonprofit social service providers.

The roots of the Career Pathway model in Minnesota can be traced to efforts going back almost a decade to provide welfare recipients with job training and a faster path to credentialing, employment, and in-demand jobs. The work began with the Joyce Foundation’s Shifting Gears initiative, which was launched in 2007 to push state policy change efforts in six Midwestern states, including Minnesota.

According to Joyce Foundation, the first five years of Shifting Gears in Minnesota resulted in FastTRAC, a “highly acclaimed adult education bridge model that was being implemented throughout the state.” Evaluations of FastTRAC have shown a strong return-on-investment and high degrees of effectiveness. Almost 90 percent of FastTRAC participants have completed a college credit or obtained a credential and 75 percent who completed their FastTRAC program gained related employment.

FastTRAC’s innovative model and strong outcomes garnered the attention of several workforce program funders. In 2013, a group of funders advocated for formalizing FastTRAC through state legislation. The result was to fund FastTRAC at $3 million over two years. Shortly after this legislation was enacted, the funders launched a collaborative of philanthropic foundations called MSPWin to focus exclusively on strengthening Minnesota’s workforce development system.

In 2014, MSPWin pushed for the creation of a new public dashboard on DEED’s website to standardize outcome reporting for adult education and workforce training programs and make them transparent to the community. FastTRAC’s outcomes, which were subsequently reported on DEED’s dashboard, showed dramatic increases in median annual earnings by participants of color, including a 108 percent increase for African Americans, from less than $10,000 to almost $20,000 in 2014.

Based on the demonstrated success of the model, MSPWin sought legislation in 2015 to again expand career pathway programs. The result was to combine the $3 million FastTRAC allocation with another competitive grant fund to create a larger career pathways grant program, which was rebranded Pathways to Prosperity and funded with $11.2 million over two years. In March of 2016, Governor Mark Dayton requested an additional $4.1 million for Pathways to Prosperity as one of his key budget proposals to address racial employment disparities.

The pathmaking partnerships are essentially triads, comprised of an employer partner, a higher-education/adult basic education partner, and a navigator partner. Leaders and workers in each point of the triad describe their ongoing relationships with each other as trustful, equal, and centered on the success of the student or trainee/employee.

An obviously crucial partner in the triads are large and small employers or sectors of employment, such as the contractors that have hired Williams and Talavera. These employers make actual commitments in advance to hire or give preferential consideration for those who complete the pathway. In turn, employers help shape the curriculum and specify their exact needs.

The educator partners in the triads serving Williams and Talavera are Summit Academy OIC’s vocational training programs at its North Minneapolis facility, and the Finishing Trades Institute of the Upper Midwest (FTI), located in Little Canada. Without these partners and this piece — some minimum of skills training and credentials by accredited institutions — most of the better career paths are simply not in reach.

The third indispensable partner, fully important as the other two, are highly experienced social service agencies that know how to improve the mindset, social skills, and self-sufficiency of low-income Minnesotans, immigrants and communities of color. For Williams, this partner was Summit’s soft skills and adult basic education component. For Talavera, it was Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (Latino Communities United in Service, or CLUES).

**THE EMPLOYERS**

Kim Maher is the compliance and recruiting supervisor for Veit Construction, the company that most recently hired Williams. “The guys say he listens, is a good learner, shows up,” Maher said. A history of success with grads like Williams is why Veit has maintained a strong partnership with Summit Academy OIC.

Veit is one of the state’s larger construction contractors and its logo is familiar to many who travel through the state. It’s a “highway heavy” construction contractor that also provides those roll-off dumpsters that one
often sees at residential and commercial construction sites. In a busy summer season, Veit employs close to 500 people in the field or in its offices, headquartered in Rogers, just northwest of the Twin Cities.

Maher, who was born on the Iron Range and reared in central Minnesota, and whose father was in the construction business, has been with Veit for 20 years, rising through the ranks. She has been focused in recent years on diversifying the company’s workforce, which, like many construction companies, has been overwhelmingly white, male, and suburban or rural.

The company has been partnering with Summit for several years. Among the eight bullet points the company highlights in its claim to excellence and national recognition, is “Diverse Workforce,” right alongside traditional marketing claims such as “Proven Professionalism and Performance” and “Superior Safety Record.”

Maher said her company has worked with other providers and trainers for communities of color, but particularly values Summit. “A lot of other organizations have more general training,” she says, “but Summit is one that really emphasized hands-on. And they teach students what it means to come to the job every day, and stay committed to that. And they also bring a strong emphasis to safety.”

For its part, Veit has improved its efforts to make sure employees are respectful and welcoming to workers of color. “We do training on harassment, we watch videos…and we discipline people (who display bias toward workers of color).”

One of the bigger challenges for young men and women of color who have been raised in urban environments, Maher says, is that they simply have not been exposed to any large machinery at all, and for that matter have little experience working in “a rugged outdoors environment.” Williams acknowledged that one of the most difficult challenges he faced as he began working was battling Minnesota’s elements, hanging from the side of a bridge, in freezing rainy winds or other harsh conditions.

Maher also has some advice for those who continue to expand and work on Career Pathway partnerships. “One focus has to be not only on educating and training and getting jobs, but on finding ways to keep them in construction,” Maher says. “This means getting more hires of color to work long enough to achieve the crucial “journeyman” level, where pay is better and availability of work is more stable and consistent.

For Talavera, the employer is Swanson & Youngdale (S&Y), a growing Midwestern business with offices in the Twin Cities, Duluth and North Dakota. It prizes itself for perennial rankings as one of the Top 600 Specialty Contractors by Engineering News Record each year. Most recently, in 2015, it was named the ninth-ranked painting contractor in the nation. Projects featured on the S&Y website include theUSBank Vikings stadium and the restoration of the Minnesota state capital.

Steve Flasch, a production manager who oversaw Talavera on his first few days on the job, rated his performance as “good so far. He will learn from these boys in his crew that it’s all about production.” Flasch said S&Y’s workforce is increasingly diverse, and includes African Americans, Latinos, eastern European immigrants, and others. Flasch says he can tell when his diverse crews are getting along “when the nicknames start coming.”

Joel Swanson, S&Y’s vice president, says his company has maintained “a strong relationship with FTI and we fully support what they do, not only to make us a better company but also to make the industry better…We definitely are striving for a more diverse and well-rounded workforce.” Swanson said he became personally acquainted with Talavera in reviewing FTI graduates, and was “very impressed with his engagement and attitude. We can always help employees improve their technical skill, but positive attitude and willingness to learn is really important. We’re happy to have him on the team. He’s earned the opportunity.”

THE EDUCATORS

Summit Academy OIC is somewhat different and more comprehensive than other Career Pathway models, in that it provides both the “educator” role for hard skills and the “navigator” role and the softer skills and counseling in the triad, all under one roof.

Summit also provides more tracks and pathways than most, with nine specific kinds of certificates advertised in brochures, six in the Construction Career Path and three in the Healthcare Career Path. Williams was a graduate of two programs, the Highway Heavy Commercial Construction program in 2013 and Heavy Equipment Operator in 2015.

The typical Summit course takes 20 weeks, in two 10-week segments. George Garnett, Director of Strategic Development for Summit, explains that the first segment consists of learning basic construction-related skills, how to handle tools, math curriculum tied to construction, and OSHA standards and safety. Then come a series of evaluations and assessments that helps the students decide which of the more specific skill areas to pursue.

In Williams’ case, the second phase involved extensive time on various simulators and actual time on a practice
field out in western Hennepin County, building on-the-job experience.

“Phase 1 is academically very rigorous,' said Dr. Anne Marie Kuiper, director of student affairs. “It includes math, blueprint reading, a very strong foundation that includes personal development but focused on hard skills too. When they graduate, they are extremely knowledgeable.”

Kuiper adds: ‘It’s also a very supportive learning culture. We make it easy for them to see how much their life will change and we provide opportunities for them to interact and engage in real-world job site situations.”

Talavera’s credentialing educator was the Finishing Trades Institute of the Upper Midwest (FTI), a state-of-the-art facility in Little Canada that serves a four-state region and four major trade industries: painting and wallcovering, drywall finishing, glazing and glassworking, and sign/display/screen process/tradeshow working. The institute is a partnership of the District Council 82 of the Painters and Allied Trades Union and three trade associations comprised of contractors and businesses.

Like Summit’s program, the FTI breaks its program into two segments, a five-week general worker readiness for finishing trades and then five more weeks of specific skill training. Patrick Rome, the institute’s director, says that much of the funding comes from withholding for the Employee Retirement Income Security Act, paid into by employers. Graduates receive a pre-apprenticeship certification and accreditation that is the same as provided by various vocation programs offered by Minnesota State College & Universities.

“We have the access to employers who need skilled workers and they (CLUES) have the access to people who need skills,” said Rome. “They (CLUES) make sure they first have the language skills and soft skills, that they understand that it’s imperative to show up and persist, then we really focus on the skills they will they will need.”

“And we make sure they are productive on that very first day on the job,” Rome adds.

Talavera recalls: “It was all hands-on work, painting equipment, high-tech gear, getting dirty, mudding, painting, taping, everything involved with industrial painting.” The training gear, as at Summit, includes some high-tech simulators that allow trainees to get a virtual feel for spray painting, without wasting paint and messing up equipment.

Josie Vautrin, political director for the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, District 82, says that consumer-driven accrediting agencies are most impressed with the fact that there “really are jobs at the end of the FTI training” and close to 100 percent placement for those who complete it.

And Rome says there are plans underway at FTI to “further develop these programs, establish more relationships and partnerships so we have a constant feed to the workforce. We want to prepare people like Emmanuel so that he can finish his apprenticeship with S&Y but prepare him for other things too, perhaps a project manager, a salesperson, a whole set of new pathways.”

THE NAVIGATORS

Louis King, Summit Academy OIC’s forceful and charismatic CEO and President, is proud of how Summit is moving young African Americans typically from $4,000 a year to $32,000 a year in a community where up to 70 percent of the workers are unemployed or underemployed.

He’s brutally frank about the discrimination that led to exclusion for communities of color and how “a white dominated culture (in the trades) meant no entry ramps for communities of color. All the entry ramps led to the corrections system.”

King is also blunt about what his students need. Crucial to that success is intensive personal navigation and warm and personal but rigorous inculcation
of basic principles. For instance, “they've got to get the study habits down and understand the rules that govern test-taking.” Williams talks about Louis King personally loaning him money in a pinch, but also the tough love and stern advice that came with that help.

Summit also has been emerging as a national leader in the new “contextualized GED” process, in which dropouts pick up their high school diploma with instruction and content that is relevant to their vocational training. “This ABE-GED side is not getting enough attention,” King says.

“Our program is really tailored to work with African American men, and although we now serve a broader population, many of our students have had no successful work experience at all,” Summit’s Garnett says. What this means is that many of the young folks Summit has tried to serve have few hard or soft skills, plus they often lack a high-school diploma. What was needed, Summit educators realized, was a new and improved lower rung on the career ladder that helped such minimally-skilled and educated young folks get a firmer first step. Almost all career training requires at least a GED, and many African American males not only lacked that, but found the coursework for a conventional GED too challenging or abstract and irrelevant.

Summit’s GED is patterned after a well-researched model at LaGuardia Community College in New York, a shorter fast-track program that has been much more successful in not only retention of students but also in outcomes for continued postsecondary success. From the Summit brochure: “For the first time ever in Minnesota, a unique GED training program is available—giving you the opportunity to attain your GED plus the skills and certification needed to begin a career in the booming construction industry. In only 30 weeks, Summit Academy will give you all the training and support you’ll need to graduate and be job-ready.” Enrollees are promised a 10-week GED training, followed immediately by “your choice of a 20-week Construction Specialty.” The program is further promoted with these inducements: “Personal Study Plan built for you. Teacher-led lessons, aligned to GED standards. GED practice tests plus extra tutoring. Upon graduation, we help you find a job.” For Talavera, the adult basic education and personal navigation at CLUES was provided by a team of seasoned professionals, all with comprehensive competence in Latino cultures. One of the key teammates is Trinidad Uribe, Jr., whose official title is Workforce Development Supports Navigator. Uribe is a career Air Force veteran, with considerable experience in sports coaching with

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**Earnings Before and After Participation in FastTRAC**

![Chart showing earnings increases before and after participation in FastTRAC program.](chart)

**Median annual earnings**

- **9 months AFTER participation**
  - American Indian: +65%
  - White: +66%
  - Black: +108%
  - Asian: +74%

- **Median annual earnings BEFORE enrollment**

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Source: Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development online outcome report card. 2014 participants. Including those consistently employed after program participation. Median enrollment duration is 7 months. Excludes those with no earnings.
young folks in the Latino communities on the west side of St. Paul. His colleagues say he has the ideal range of experience to be a tough but loving personal trainer for Career Pathway travelers.

“I follow the students right through every week of their training (at both CLUES and their credentialing phases at FTI),” Uribe said. “I help them address their personal issues, and I keep’ em going, because we don’t want ‘em to drop out.”

CLUES’ Career Pathways include two tracks, the finishing trades route pursued by Talavera, and another track in customer service that culminates with a National Retail Federation certification. CLUES leaders meet quarterly with about 30 employers to continue learning about their exact needs, and how the pathway training can be improved, says Ann Meyers, Employment Services Manager. A crucial element for Latinos, of course, is English language instruction and providing the right interventions to promote a wide range of competencies and language fluency.

Another key player on the CLUES navigation team is Kirsten Lande, who recruits prospects both for Career Pathways and potential employers. Lande says she literally walks the streets and visits neighborhoods looking for recruits, promoting the Career Pathway program by word-of-mouth and through flyers like the one that attracted Talavera’s attention at El Burrito Mercado. Yet another key navigator on the team is Employment Counselor Maribel Navarrete, who steps in toward the end, helps with mock interviews and résumé preparation, helping to seal the deal and get folks placed in jobs.

Meyers sums it all up and describes the emerging art and science of navigation as “the cherry on top” of the Career Pathway model. “I’ve been doing this for eight years and we could always get people IN to programs but we couldn’t get them to focus and finish. Now we are doing that.”

AND, THE KIDS

Between the two of them, Williams and Talavera are the fathers of eight young children. Without prompting, both repeatedly emphasized their feeling of responsibility for their kids and their aspirations for giving them better odds than they were dealt.

In promotional brochures for Summit Academy OIC, Williams is photographed holding two of his younger children in his lap and a third is smiling at his side. Talavera’s daughter attended his graduation and he’s proud that his three children are qualifying for gifted-and-talented programs in schools. “They know where I come from, they know about my struggles and I can tell they are excited and happy for my progress,” Talavera said. “They love me and I love them.”

WHY DO CAREER PATHWAYS GET BETTER RESULTS?

All successful training programs must focus on real-world local demand and labor market data for skills needs. This takes committed employer partners who help design programs and commit to hiring. Beyond that, Minnesota’s more promising Career Pathway programs are different from traditional models in the following ways.

• **Seamless integration of service.** By blending social services, basic skills education and technical training at colleges — usually offered separately — the best Career Pathway programs increase the likelihood of skill attainment and self-sufficiency. They also enable cost sharing, making services and tuition free for participants.

• **Personal navigators.** By providing every student with individualized help to complete coursework and overcome personal challenges, Career Pathway programs help participants overcome roadblocks that stop many traditional students.

• **Focus on target populations.** Programs enable low-income adults, particularly communities of color, to get on a path to careers with family-sustaining wages. By focusing on adults out of the workforce or those receiving public benefits, Minnesota gets a high return on investment by reducing those benefit payments and increasing tax receipts.
MSPWin works towards a prosperous and equitable Minnesota where businesses have the skilled workers needed to compete, and all adults have the opportunity to participate in the workforce and advance towards family-sustaining wages. We’re committed to prioritizing state support where it is most needed and will have the biggest impact by helping our most in need adults get training and support to get on a path to a successful career.

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