



# Advancing Racial Equity through Career Pathways *Community-Centered Solutions*

**CLASP**  
Policy solutions that work for low-income people

October 2018 | Duy Pham

## The Convening

In July 2018, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and Workforce Collaborative of the Greater Washington Community Foundation hosted a convening titled “Maximizing the Power of Pathways: Vital Career Pathway Conversations.” It brought together education and workforce development leaders from states, national organizations, advocates, funders, and federal agency staff to share perspectives on four career pathway issues:

- Guided pathways alignment;
- Increasing the use of Ability to Benefit;
- Leveraging career pathways to advance racial equity; and
- Measuring success through career pathway research.

This brief is part of a series highlighting lessons from our convening as well as new research. You’ll learn what’s working, what isn’t, and collaboration opportunities for states to provide better career pathways.

## The issue

Historically, systemic racism and public disinvestment in communities of color have contributed to racial gaps in income, employment, and education. At times, our nation's workforce and education systems have been complicit in these issues by poorly serving people of color.<sup>1</sup> Career pathways, however, are a service-delivery model that can close achievement gaps and advance racial equity. Specifically, the model offers an opportunity to retool our workforce and education systems to better serve individuals with varied education and skill levels and non-academic needs.

"Career pathway" is defined across three federal laws: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Higher Education Act (HEA), and the Strengthening Career & Technical Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act (Perkins V). In WIOA, career pathways encourage workforce partnerships to better serve individuals with barriers to employment.

WIOA prioritizes people with barriers to employment for career and training services, which include career pathways. The law identifies 14 barriers to employment, including low-incomes, indigenous affiliation, justice involvement, English-language and literacy needs, substantial cultural barriers, and eligible migrant and seasonal farm work.<sup>2</sup> Black and Latinx people are overrepresented within many of the specified populations and face unique challenges at finding quality employment. That is not, however, explicitly recognized in the law.

Under WIOA's definition<sup>3</sup>, career pathways are a combination of rigorous, high-quality education, training, and other services that:

- (A) Aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;
- (B) Prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including Registered Apprenticeships;
- (C) Includes counseling to support an individual in achieving their education and career goals;
- (D) Includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;
- (E) Organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates their educational and career advancement to the extent practicable;
- (F) Enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least 1 recognized postsecondary credential; and
- (G) Helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

WIOA requires local workforce boards to convene their education partners to develop and implement career pathways, especially for individuals with barriers to employment (who are disproportionately people of color). By providing these workers foundational and occupational skills that local employers

value, along with critical supportive services, career pathways are a proven approach to promote educational attainment and economic mobility.<sup>4</sup> However, in order to advance racial equity, pathways should be explicitly designed to support the needs of communities of color.

WIOA also requires states to report participation by race/ethnicity. That illuminates barriers and shows how WIOA career pathways affect racial disparities in education and economic outcomes. In addition, WIOA's Statistical Adjustment Model (SAM) allows states to negotiate performance targets, taking into consideration increased service to populations with barriers. SAM allows continuous improvement to be measured by increased service to communities of color who may have additional barriers to achieving target outcomes. In theory, SAM appropriately adjusts performance goals for states that provide career and training services to hard-to-serve populations or have more difficult labor market conditions. This accounts for populations that need more time and higher-intensity services.<sup>5</sup>

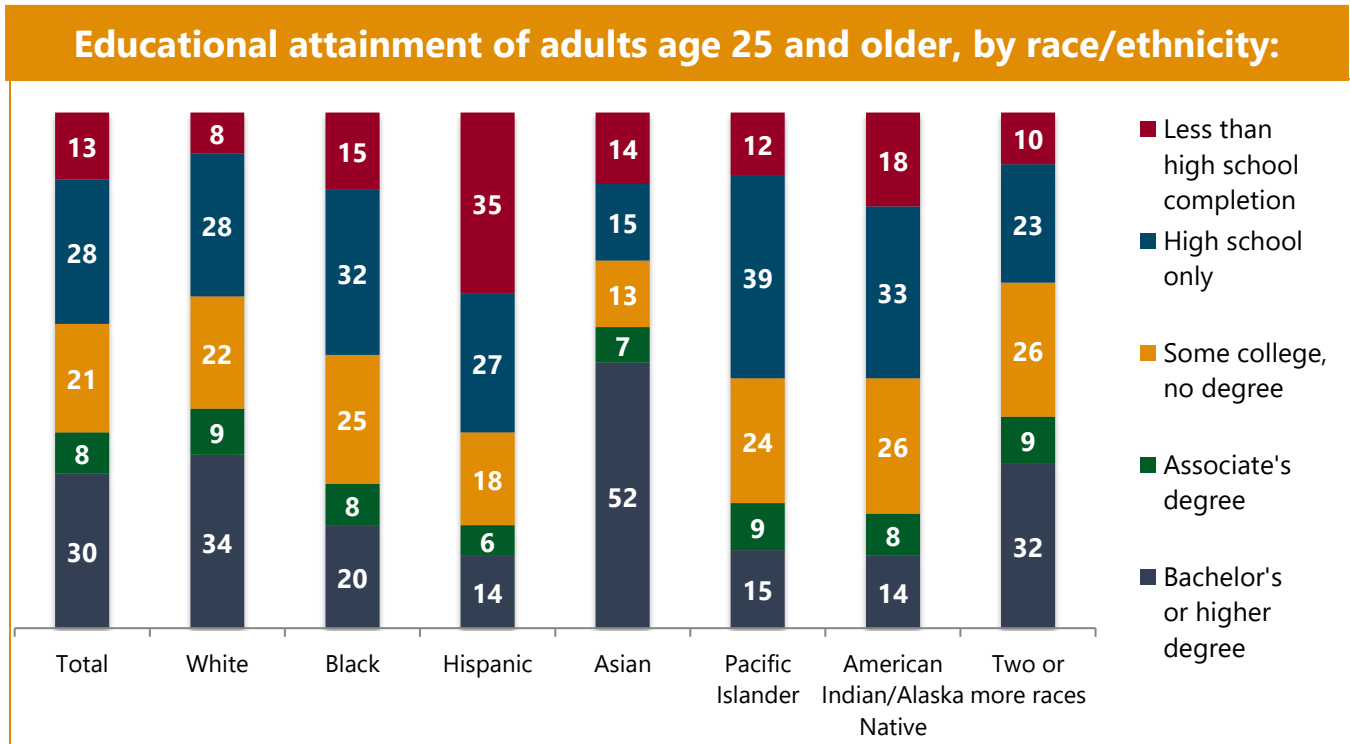
Performance measures are now shared across all WIOA core programs, which can also encourage quality program design through career pathway models. For example, previously, title I providers only reported exit measures, while title II providers were required to measure interim progress. Now, however, the entire workforce development system will be rewarded for interim progress measures. That will allow career pathway participants to demonstrate progress on the way to employment and credential outcomes. The five types of Measurable Skill Gain also allow education and workforce practitioners to be rewarded for longer-term service models, including career pathways, that help individuals with educational and economic needs incrementally build skills toward lasting success. That removes providers' incentive to provide only short-term services.<sup>6</sup>

## Background

### *Education and training needs of communities of color*

Two-thirds of jobs require some postsecondary education or training.<sup>7</sup> That's why it's critical to leverage career pathways to provide education and training to communities of color. Because career pathways target individuals with lower levels of educational attainment who are in low-wage jobs, they can be a strong tool for advancing racial equity. But that's only if policymakers and practitioners make them accessible to communities of color.

Systemic barriers often prevent people of color from completing and persisting in secondary and postsecondary education and from obtaining quality employment. Educational attainment for Black, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic adults lags behind educational attainment for white adults. That contributes to generational racial disparities in wealth and income. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, white adults are far more likely to earn a college degree than Black, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic adults.<sup>8</sup>



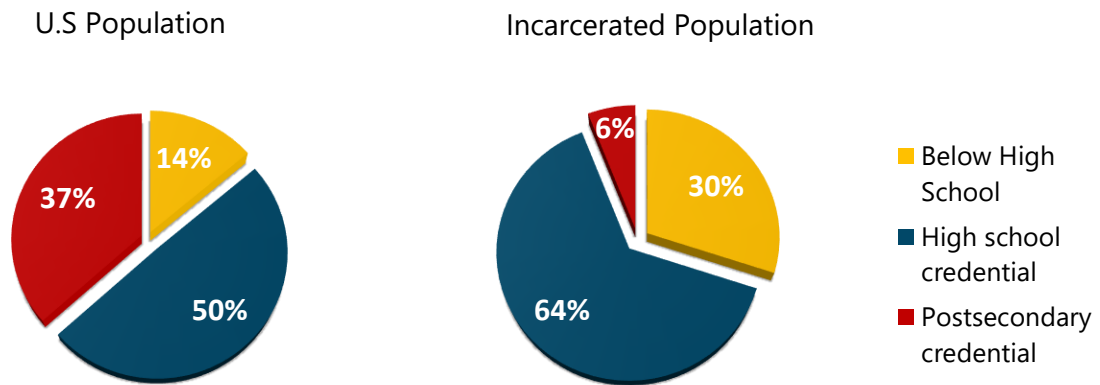
Furthermore, Black and Latino workers are much more likely to have low-wage jobs. In fact, over half of Black workers and nearly 60 percent of Latino workers are paid less than \$15 an hour. Latino workers make up 16.5 percent of the workforce but account for 23 percent of those making less than \$15 per hour. Black workers make up 12 percent of the workforce but account for 15 percent of those making less than \$15/hour.<sup>9</sup>

Lack of educational and employment opportunities are two factors behind high wealth disparities among racial groups. In 2016, Black families' median wealth was \$17,600, compared to white families' median wealth of \$171,000. For Hispanic families, the median wealth was just \$20,700.<sup>10</sup> However, improving educational outcomes within communities of color will not on its own close this gap. Research shows that a white person with a college degree has, on average, three times the wealth of a Black person with the same degree.<sup>11</sup>

**Serving justice involved communities**

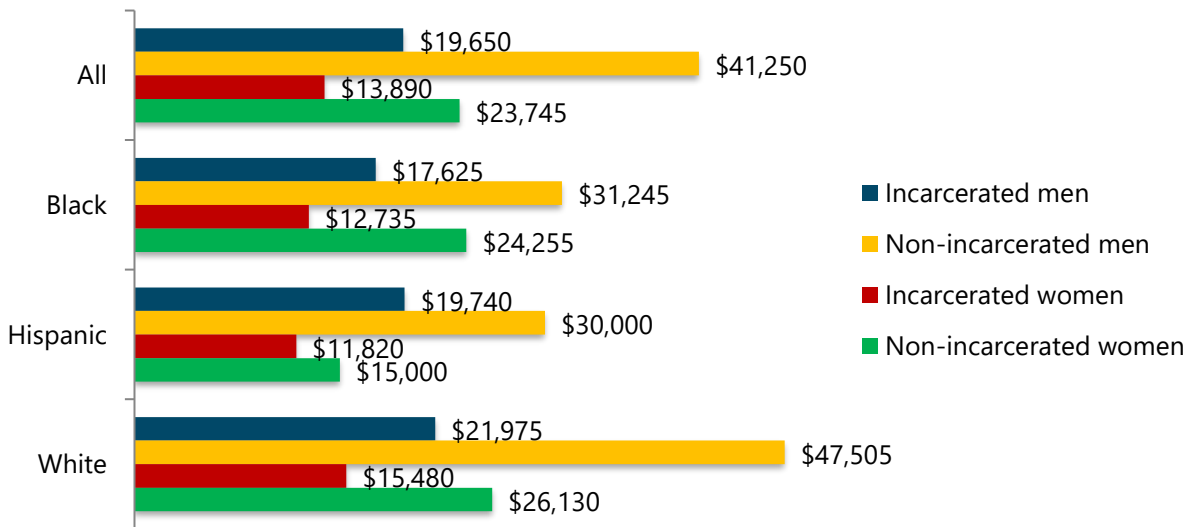
People who are incarcerated must be recognized as a talent pipeline to restore vibrancy to our nation’s most marginalized communities. Roughly two-thirds of the 650,000 individuals who are released from the criminal justice system every year are rearrested within three years. Providing quality education and training pathways to those who are incarcerated—and continuing those pathways when individuals reenter society—is a proven way to break this cycle. While correctional education and training is not a panacea, it’s shown to increase employment post-release and is linked to lower recidivism.<sup>12</sup>

**Educational attainment of incarcerated individuals compared to the overall U.S.**



Source: **Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults, 2014**

**Pre-incarceration income levels of incarcerated Americans in comparison to non-incarcerated Americans by race and gender**



Source: **Prisons of Poverty: Uncovering the pre-incarceration incomes of the imprisoned**, Prison Policy Initiative

It's well documented that incredible racial disparities exist in the criminal justice system. Black people are incarcerated five times more than white people, while Hispanic people are incarcerated nearly twice as much as white people.<sup>13</sup> Across all races, incarcerated people are more likely to come from low-income communities. And they're less likely to have a postsecondary education. However, Black and Hispanic incarcerated individuals have lower pre-incarceration wages and lower levels of educational attainment compared to their white counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

Career pathways can help incarcerated people who have a variety of needs obtain quality education and training that leads to sustainable employment when they're released. Nationally, these individuals have greater educational need than the average person. Ninety-four percent of incarcerated people lack a postsecondary credential. Three in 10 haven't graduated high school.<sup>15</sup> Correctional education programs succeed when they follow a career pathway model that offers a variety of entry points and opportunities to obtain secondary and postsecondary credentials as well as certifications tied to in-demand jobs.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, when individuals return to society, career pathway models within the department of corrections must be integrated into state education and workforce systems, so that individuals can seamlessly continue their education and training from any location upon release. Employers must also be brought on as a partner to resist discrimination against people with records.<sup>17</sup>

Career pathways should also allow justice-involved individuals to pursue a variety of educational opportunities beyond non-degree credentials. Traditional postsecondary courses are not typically offered in correctional settings in favor of workforce certificate programs. This limits the educational opportunities for those incarcerated and may contribute to racial and socioeconomic inequities in educational attainment.

Black and Latino people are more likely than white people to report workforce certificates as their highest level of educational attainment. Similarly, certificate holders often come from families with low-to-moderate incomes.<sup>18</sup> Due largely to systemic bias, low-income Black and Hispanic people are overrepresented in the justice system. Limiting their educational opportunities can perpetuate these educational disparities. Research also shows that postsecondary prison programs have positive individual and community benefits during and after incarceration.<sup>19</sup>

### Career pathways in Indiana corrections

In 2012, the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD), in collaboration with the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) and other local and statewide partners, created the Hoosier Initiative for Re-Entry (HIRE) program to help returning citizens reintegrate into society and provide opportunities for them to improve their lives in a sustainable way through work.

The HIRE program works with employers to understand their business needs and determine the knowledge, skills, abilities, and aptitudes that will make an employee successful in their organization. HIRE participants are placed in one of several industries based on their skills and interests. The top industries for placement are production (48 percent), restaurant (15 percent), warehouse (9 percent), and construction (7 percent). Employers that participate in the HIRE program may be eligible for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) of up to \$9,600 per eligible employee.

Prior to release, HIRE coordinators deliver a curriculum targeting soft skills, workplace aptitude, and motivation. Upon a participant's release, he or she will receive job training through one-on-one or group sessions. Additionally, HIRE clients are referred to DWD's other programs, such as WorkINdiana, Youth, America's Job Centers, case managers, or Veteran Services. HIRE has also created partnerships with other state entities like Vocational Rehabilitation, the Bureau of Developmental Disabilities, the Department of Child Services, and others. The HIRE coordinator will place the participant with an employer and meet with them regularly for the first year to identify any work-related issues or needs. HIRE coordinators also meet regularly with employers to discuss any changes in the program and address additional employer needs. Consistent growth and adaptation have taken job placements from under 800 in 2012 to just under 2,300 in 2017. They're pacing to place over 3,000 Indiana residents into employment in 2018.

*John Nally, Indiana Department of Corrections*

### Serving immigrant communities

Low-income immigrant communities need access to quality career pathway programs that help them and their families advance economically. Immigrants and their children make up a continuously growing segment of the U.S. population and workforce. It is therefore critical that education and training systems are designed to help them fully and successfully participate in the workforce. Career pathway models tied to in-demand jobs and sectors serve immigrants' needs when they include supportive services and integrated education and training (IET) that concurrently provides industry-specific occupational skills, workforce preparation, and adult basic education. For example, IET models can provide quality English-language learning that is contextualized and relevant to immigrants' career goals.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, there are over 3.2 million immigrants, commonly referred to as Dreamers, who came to the United States before turning 18 and have been living in the country for at least four years. Some Dreamers became eligible for work authorization through the Obama administration's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. But others weren't eligible because they didn't meet the program's education or age requirements, among other factors. An estimated 34 percent of immediately eligible DACA recipients came from families with incomes below the poverty line, putting postsecondary education out of reach.<sup>21</sup>

The Trump Administration terminated the DACA program in 2017, but current beneficiaries can still renew their status.<sup>22</sup>

DACA recipients can access all WIOA services. However, immigrants without work authorization are ineligible for services funded by WIOA title I.<sup>23</sup> Introduced legislation offers a way for career pathways to change that. The most recent Dream Act allows states to leverage WIOA title II to develop career pathway models that can help all Dreamers access title I funds.

If Congress passes the Dream Act of 2017 states would be able to utilize career pathways models to help Dreamers become eligible for title I funds *and* meet citizenship requirements. To become eligible, Dreamers without a high school credential could enroll in federally funded WIOA Title II Adult Education programs to qualify themselves for conditional status and work authorization. With work authorization, they would be able to enroll in a workforce training program funded by WIOA title I that leads to a postsecondary credential. This would let them meet citizenship requirements and boost their career prospects.<sup>24</sup>

### Encouraging co-enrollment to support immigrants in Maryland

In April 2017, the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation issued guidance to better coordinate WIOA Title I Workforce and Title II Adult Education programs. Meanwhile, the state's Skilled Immigrant Taskforce attempted to build equity into the workforce development and education system. While many immigrants participated in title II programs, the state has invested in funds to seed co-enrollment to increase the use of title I programs by title II participants. The request for proposals requires title I programs to apply with an employer and a title II partner.

*Erin Roth, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation*



## ***Serving communities of color with disabilities***

Career pathways are also an opportunity to provide education and training services to individuals with disabilities, who are often excluded from the workforce. Working-age adults with a disability are much more likely to be living in poverty and be unemployed than those without a disability. That's partly because they can't access adequate education and training services. While having a disability can often lead to poverty, living in poverty can contribute to disabilities due to environmental stressors and poor educational and health care access.

Along the intersection of race and disability, career pathways can provide a solution to economic mobility for those often left out of the workforce.

### **Career pathways for individuals with disabilities in Virginia**

Virginia convened a state career-pathway leadership group that has helped elevate career pathways into its programs. Virginia acknowledged that having a disability can lead to poverty, while poverty can also cause disabilities. To make its career pathway systems accessible to those with disabilities, the state has focused on aligning systems and services, making co-enrollment across programs a key priority.

*Emily West, Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services*

For people of color who have a disability, disparities in poverty are pervasive. Thirty-nine percent of Black people and 30 percent of Latino people with disabilities live in poverty, compared to 24 percent of white people with disabilities.<sup>25</sup> Despite the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), people with disabilities have limited educational opportunities. Only 9 percent of Black and Latino people with a disability have a bachelor's degree.<sup>26</sup>

In 2009, the United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division launched an aggressive effort to enforce the Supreme Court's decision in *Olmstead v. L.C.* The decision requires states to eliminate unnecessary segregation of people with disabilities. They must also ensure people with disabilities receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs. President Obama issued a proclamation launching the "Year of Community Living" and directed the Administration to redouble enforcement efforts.<sup>27</sup> The Division responded by working with state and local governments officials, attorneys, disability rights groups, and representatives of the Department of Health and Human Services to develop a nationwide program to enforce the integration mandate of the Department's regulation implementing ADA title II.

States have created "Olmstead plans" with the explicit goal of ensuring people with disabilities are living, learning, working, and enjoying life in the most integrated settings. State and federal investments are supporting these plans.

Since 2010, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has awarded grants to 55 projects in 30 states to improve education, training, and employment outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities.<sup>28</sup> In its most recent funding round, grantees will make more strategic use of a career pathways framework to improve training and employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities in WIOA-funded employment and training services.<sup>29</sup> They'll do so in partnership with vocational rehabilitation, community colleges, additional educational institutions, human service agencies, and businesses. The projects will drive improved coordination between the public workforce system and industry to help businesses meet their workforce needs by recruiting, hiring, and training individuals with disabilities. When designing and implementing these programs, it is important that people of color who have a disability are recognized and targeted in these efforts.

## What we learned

States are recognizing the need for racial equity in their workforce systems, focusing more efforts on understanding the racial demographics of their participants. States must also critically analyze the disproportionate rate of minority populations accessing services and develop accessible career pathways for communities of color.

In Oregon, for example, the state recognized the community college system serves 50 percent low-income students and 50 percent students of color. Practitioners and stakeholders in the state have been challenged to examine these students' needs and their implications for equity. In Texas, about 40 percent of adult education participants are undocumented, creating barriers to education and training as well as employment. Recognizing this, Texas has expanded opportunities in Integrated Education and Training.

While states have recognized the need for racial equity in the workforce system, it's critical to establish a mechanism for embedding equity. In Illinois, the state workforce board organized a career-pathway working group focused on "special populations," including returning citizens and English-language learners. Adult education partners collaborated to create the Illinois Essential Skills Framework to address employability skills and set parameters for using the framework across the adult education and partner systems.

### Embedding racial equity in Minnesota career pathway grants

In 2016, Minnesota appropriated \$35 million to community-based organizations to develop programs to "improve economic opportunities for people of color, women, people with disabilities, veterans, and/or youth." Racial equity was a key consideration and initially made up 40 percent of the scoring criteria that included the racial and ethnic makeup of the organization's leadership and staff, as well as, the organization's track record in serving communities of color. In the next round, 25 percent of the scoring criteria will have racial equity considerations.

*Mimi Daniel, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development*

## Conclusion

We must move beyond simply recognizing the *need* for equity. Career pathways provide an opportunity to address structural issues by directly working with employers to remove barriers, as well as engaging communities in broader discussions of structural racism and implicit bias. Improving educational outcomes for people of color will not be enough to eliminate racial attainment gaps, but intentional career pathways centered on equity can begin the work to advance racial equity.

## Endnotes

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