THE PATH TO SUCCESS

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.
ARINTA FLEURY radiates a smiling, upbeat presence and by all accounts is highly competent and personable at her new job, guiding and comforting patients through their MRI scans and the inevitably anxious processes for diagnosing disease at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

Her route to this promising new career at Minnesota’s most renowned health care center was long and winding, and improbable. It began with her birth in Jakarta, Indonesia, some 45 years ago. Fleury was married and had a child, but was obligated to fend for herself after a divorce. She acquired some training in office administration, worked as a secretary for a couple of multi-national companies, and then married an American doctor.

Culture shock hit her hard, Fleury recalls with a laugh, when she and her new husband moved in 2001. They traveled 9,400 miles to Minnesota’s Iron Range, from one of the hottest and most densely populated places on earth to one of the coldest and most sparsely populated.

“People told me, do you KNOW where you are going...Everything was pine trees.” Life was good for a while, but her husband had no family in Minnesota, and when he died a few years later, she found herself and her two small children virtually alone and facing a very uncertain future.

By nature a bubbly, outgoing person, Fleury recalls feeling “very, very depressed” and isolated, without any family or a close network of friends for support. She sold her house, rented an apartment and enrolled at Hibbing Community College, and ended up in Duluth. She then heard that there might be more opportunities, given her increasing interest in health care, a couple hundred miles south in Rochester, home of the world-renowned Mayo Clinic and a booming health care industry.

On a hunch, Fleury and her children, Angelica and Daniel, picked up and moved again in 2010. Getting by on her Social Security survivor’s benefits, she enrolled in a program for dental assistants at Rochester Community & Technical College. She soon discovered that she wasn’t really suited for that kind of work. On the advice of an RCTC adviser, Fleury took a gamble and enrolled in the first class of a brand new program, the Rochester “Bridges to Healthcare” Career Pathway partnership.

Fleury thrived in the program. After some twists and turns, she was hired in June of 2014 by the Mayo Clinic as an administrative clinical assistant. Her job is basically to shepherd patients through the MRI imaging process, and her warm demeanor does a lot to lift the spirits of patients, as her superiors attest. “She’s very friendly and outgoing and cares about the patient, takes the time to get to know them,” says Melissa Louks, her immediate supervisor.

AMBER MASSAGLIA, 31, a colleague of Fleury’s at Mayo, traveled a similarly winding path. Her father was in the Air Force, and she moved all over the country when she was very young. Her family had roots in southern Minnesota, and they settled there when her
for diagnosis or treatment.

Articulate and confident, Massaglia now earns about twice what she made at her Mankato jobs, with outstanding health care coverage and other benefits. She is confident that she has turned a corner. She is engaged to be married next summer, and her daughter is doing well having just started kindergarten. She sees lots of opportunities ahead. “This job is awesome,” Massaglia says. “And this is definitely the most positive environment I’ve ever worked in.”

SAMANTHA RAINES, 25, is beginning to thrive as an administrative accounting assistant for the National Sports Center in Blaine. She earns more than $30,000 a year, half again as much as she was paid in a series of entry-level jobs for big-box retailers. She’s relieved to be self-sufficient, and already thinking about the next rung on her career ladder.

She’s come very far and rather fast. In late 2013, Raines was drifting desperately between homelessness, hospitals, public assistance, and low-paying jobs. She struggled with depression and anxiety while caring for two small children. Her dream of a career in criminal justice was pretty much dashed.

“I really was at the end of my rope,” she recalls. Her troubled childhood included abandonment by her father, a foster home between the ages of 5 and 9, and an upbringing in poverty. She found herself in a rather vast economic netherworld that does not pay livable wages to about half of all Minnesota adults who lack a postsecondary credential.
Raines knew all along she had potential. She got good grades in school, graduating with honors from Saint Francis High School in northern Anoka County, and from a for-profit college where she earned what would turn out to be a worthless degree in criminal justice. She borrowed $40,000 for the degree and learned painfully afterward, despite sending out hundreds of applications, that the degree was not highly regarded by employers in the field.

The key event that led to her pathway out was actually a referral by Anoka County Human Services workers who thought she might do well in a relatively new kind of workforce training and postsecondary credentialing program known as Career Connections.

“I was very skeptical but they said if I made it through all three levels of the program, I was pretty much guaranteed at least an internship.” Raines not only made it through the program, she did so well at learning Excel and other computer spreadsheet programs that she was soon helping her fellow classmates pass their tests too.

Raines is immensely thankful and proud of being off public assistance (except for continuing day-care subsidies), and now she has many more options in her life. She still thinks about going back and getting more credentials in the criminal justice or social justice field — something that helps folks rather than punishes them. “I like the thought of helping people, making a difference for them when they’re at their lowest point.”

REGINA WILSON greatly enjoys her work at an assisted-living facility for older adults in Columbia Heights. At 40, she’s finally earning better pay and benefits than she’s ever had, and at a convenient location just an easy bus ride from her apartment in Fridley. She has also built a foundation of five college credits, on which she intends to stack more. She happily declares: “I’m in love with health care and I love helping people.”

Wilson was in desperate straits in late 2015. She was living in a shelter in north Minneapolis with her daughter LaShae, now 12, who was feeling threatened at school and unsafe in their neighborhood. Wilson had worked in various health care settings and had received some related training from her church, where she had been very active. But she lacked college credits or credentials that satisfied employers. And try as she might, she could not qualify for jobs that paid a livable wage. She had been working part-time for a national department store chain.

“I knew that I wanted some change for the better and to be financially secure, and not be depending on government,” Wilson recalled. “My family was upset; my daughter was suffering. And then I met the people at the Anoka County WorkForce Center. It was like a new family.”

Wilson, like Raines, went through an initial “Career Assessment & Exploration” course that evaluated and instructed them on soft skills such as time management, communication, and goal-setting, and provided tips on how to be a successful student. The course focused on workplace expectations and included tours of potential employers.

Wilson recalls with a laugh a set of lessons in which students talked about “how to be professional” and “how to avoid drama.” There were sessions about personality types — “Agreeable Amy” and “Negotiable Nancy.”

Wilson said her introductory course was a revelation. “What was most useful to me was the website showing jobs I didn’t know existed in health care, that they made so much money and that they were near where I lived. … I was excited, and it got me thinking about what I really wanted to do.” Wilson mastered the college-level courses she was assigned and, partly because of previous experience in health care jobs, she breezed through the practical certification exam to be a nursing assistant.

Wilson now has her sights on getting credentialed for dispensing medication and she has discovered that she really loves working with seniors. “It’s been great, a blessing, considering where I came from,” Wilson says. “I feel empowered that I have a career now, and not just a job.”
PART II: THE PATHMAKERS

The Pathways for Fleury and Massaglia in Rochester and for Raines and Wilson in Anoka County were blazed through a thicket of existing and overlapping education and training programs. The pathmakers say development of this model has taken years of careful program 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 institutionalizing FastTRAC through state legislation. The result was funding 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 subsequently were 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 a key budget proposal to address racial employment disparities.

The pathmaking partnerships that served our four pathfinders in Rochester and Anoka County are each essentially triads, comprised of an employer partner, a postsecondary/adult basic education partner, and a navigator partner. Leaders and workers at 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.

A crucial partner in any triad is key large employers or sectors of employment, such as the health care providers that hired Fleury, Massaglia and Wilson, and the National Sports Center that hired Raines. These employers make actual commitments in advance to hire or give preferential consideration to those who complete the pathway.

The educator partners in the triads are Hawthorne Education Center and Rochester Community & Technical College in Rochester, and Anoka Technical College. Without this piece — some amount 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, is highly experienced social service agencies that know how to improve the condition and self-sufficiency of low-income Minnesotans, immigrants and communities of color. For our Rochester duo, this partner was Workforce Development Inc. and the United Way of Olmsted County. For our Anoka County duo, it was the Minnesota WorkForce Center in Blaine.

The Employers

The Mayo Clinic’s importance to Minnesota, and southeastern Minnesota in particular, can hardly be overstated. Wikipedia describes the Mayo Clinic as “the first and largest integrated nonprofit medical group practice in the world, employing more than 3,800 physicians and scientists and 50,900 allied health staff.”

Mayo’s every move is watched closely by economists, the health care industry and public policy experts. And the Bridges to Healthcare program that helped
Fleury and Massaglia has attracted visitors at the highest level, including Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith and Katie Clark Sieben, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development.

The Career Pathway project that served Fleury and Massaglia fits in with the ambitious Destination Medical Center project, described as a “catalyst to position (Rochester and Minnesota) as the world’s premier destination for health and wellness; attracting people, investment opportunities, and jobs City for Health and supporting the economic growth of Minnesota, its bioscience sector, and beyond.”

Guy Finne, Human Resources Manager for Mayo Clinic, is enthusiastic about the potential of the Career Pathways model to help solve a looming worker shortage for Mayo and reduce racial inequality in an increasingly diverse southeastern Minnesota. “This model is literally seamless,” Finne says.

Mayo used to do job training entirely on its own, Finne explains. But given the complexities of a changing workforce, Mayo realized that the process could be more effective if it partnered more closely with groups involved in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse pool of potential employees. This led to the Bridges to Healthcare partnership with the Hawthorne Education Center; an alternative adult education center operated by the Rochester School District, and Rochester Community & Technical College. Mayo contributes some $85,000 a year to the Bridges program, and like other Career Pathway models, it is financed by “braiding” funding from public, private and nonprofit sources, including federal, state and local government human service and workforce training programs.

A recent prospectus by the Bridges program advertises that it “links diverse populations striving for stable and meaningful employment, with the education and training required to grow their skills.” And it adds this important observation: “The project’s target population of immigrants, refugees, and undereducated adults is becoming integral to the success of (Destination Medical Center) and to area health care providers’ need for trained and compassionate employees.”

All partners involved in the Healthcare Bridges model say they are committed to expanding the number of people on current pathways. They are already opening up more tracks offered to more occupations and types of careers.

Although not hiring at the scale of Mayo, the National Sports Center (NSC) in Blaine, Raines’ employer, was driven by the same concerns for the changing workforce in their vicinity. The NSC, which operates a vast sprawl of outdoor and indoor fields and ice rinks east of Highway 65 in Blaine, describes itself as “the world’s largest amateur sports and meeting facility.”

Raines’ work for the NSC involves the accounting and financial records that go into operating more than 300 programs and events annually in a variety of sports, as well as hosting numerous national and international competitions that draw more than 4 million visitors a year. The NSC’s website describes it as a “priceless, innovative and unique state asset,” and Raines agrees that it’s simply a much more interesting place to work than any she’s ever known.

The NSC’s connection to Career Pathways occurred in part because of a realization that the international profile of the NSC and its own mission could be served by reaching out and serving, as well as actually hiring, the growing “under-served” populations in Anoka County and Minnesota. Todd Johnson, the NSC’s relatively new executive director, said his organization will be working harder in a variety of ways to serve low-income youth and communities of color in Minnesota, and to hire from those communities too.
“It’s incumbent for us to be much more intentional and we have to be deliberate about it.”

The NSC is only in its second year of offering opportunities to Career Connections graduates but the experience with Raines and others has been positive. James Nelson, Raines’ direct supervisor, describes her as “a really good team player. She embraces the positive, does her work well and on time, and is asking for more and more. She’s a beacon of hope for others in the program.”

“Samantha stood out for us,” said Robert Lodge, a marketing coordinator and graphic designer for the NSC who tends to the Career Pathway program. “We had a good experience with the way she interacted in the office. She finished projects on time and asked for more.” Raines wryly notes that she gets “ridiculously excited” when NSC bank statements reconcile perfectly with her spreadsheets.

**The Educators**

A partnership within a partnership helps explain the success of the Healthcare Bridges Career Pathway program. One point of the triad, the educator piece, is actually another partnership between the Rochester Public School District’s adult basic education and community education services and Rochester Community & Technical College (RCTC).

“It really is a partnership, not just on paper, but in the best possible ways, says Julie Nigon, co-manager of the Hawthorne Education Center Adult and Family Literacy Center, which earns rave reviews from other partners. “We are a team of people from different institutions, with different rules, different funding sources, different requirements from different bosses, but everybody works together for the right reasons.”

Partly by studying a Career Pathway model in Washington state, RCTC and Hawthorne put together a closely integrated set of developmental, remedial and adult education classes and traditional college courses. Watching a Career Pathway class in action, Nigon said is like “watching an elegant ballroom dance, Fred and Ginger, one teacher delivering information and another watching for facial expressions in the class or putting the most important points on the board.”

As with other Career Pathway models, a team spirit or “cohort” mentality is fostered among students and becomes a critical ingredient for success. “The students work together closely, they keep track of each other, and if somebody’s missing they get on the phone right away and ask ‘why aren’t you here?’” The strong personal relationships that form between and among participants and staff lasts well after graduation,

---

**Earnings Before and After Participation in FastTRAC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Median annual earnings</th>
<th>9 months AFTER participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>$14,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>$22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>$24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Median annual earnings BEFORE enrollment**

- American Indian: $6,000
- White: $4,000
- Black: $2,000
- Asian: $8,000

+65% +66% +108% +74%

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.
Nigon says, and graduates are comfortable enough to tell the teachers and program administrators exactly how they can improve too. "The bottom line for Nigon: "I have the best job in Rochester."

In Anoka County, as in Rochester, the educator piece also is a partnership within a partnership. It’s a combination of adult basic education and traditional college courses, provided by a consortium of partners in several locations: Metro North Adult Basic Education, Anoka Technical College and Anoka Ramsey Community College.

“The reason I think Career Pathways are so good is that they work well for people short-term, between jobs, who are just trying to get started out there,” says Noel Lutsey, Director of Professional and Workforce Training for the joint program. “Not everyone can commit to two years or four years of school, and this is really valuable, quickly equipping people with skills and in areas where we know there are jobs.”

Equally valuable, Lutsey says, “employers get what they want. They know they are getting somebody with a solid foundation of skills, much better than a temp service, and people who stand a much better chance of retention.”

One of the big problems that the closely coached and navigated Career Pathway model addresses, Lutsey adds, is that “many people have test anxiety and fail for that reason.” A team spirit built around the “cohort model,” keeping the group together as they proceed to completion, is an important secret to success.

“It happens because they work as a group and encourage themselves and build confidence that they can accomplish something,” Lutsey says. “Now they know a lot of people who believe in them and a feeling that we don’t let each other fail.”

Raines, Lutsey recalls, was a sparkplug who kept her cohort together. “We could tell from the start she was one of the gems. She was not afraid to ask questions and she rallied her cohort to study with her and be part of the journey. She became one of their spokespersons, including leading a presentation during a recent visit by Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith and state officials.

The Navigators

Ruth Borsheim, an employee of Workforce Development Inc., in Rochester, a nonprofit agency that works in partnership with the Hawthorne Education Center, is an accomplished navigator for

"It’s extremely rewarding to see someone from the starting point, not all that confident, and follow them all the way through to being in tears because they got the job that they were dreaming of, and then seeing what that brings to the family and children too.”

---

**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.
the Rochester Career Pathway program. Navigators are the essential players in the Career Pathway model, the troubleshooters who are there in person or on the phone, helping pathfinders overcome hurdles, deal with personal problems and complete their coursework.

Borsheim says her approach is to build “strong rapport with students pretty early.” This means “getting them to dive into themselves and learn what values they have and how it matches” the career they seek.

Echoing the themes expressed by other navigators, Borsheim said her job as a coach involves being warm and supportive, but also delivering tough love and teaching persistence and grit. “I just keep on ‘em pretty hard,” she says.

“Some of the more common issues are daycare and transportation, someone having personal safety issues at home, domestic violence and homelessness,” Borsheim says. These are the kinds of things that bother me when I leave the office.”

Fleury and Massaglia are emphatic about the importance of the personal touch and the problem-solving skills that their navigators brought to their cohort of pathfinders. Massaglia, who had been frustrated trying to acquire college credits through online courses, says that the close personal touch and “shoulders to lean on” were all that she and others needed and that she’s still in touch with Borsheim.

Stressful as it is to help folks navigate and witness their hardships up close, Borsheim said she feels “extremely lucky to do this job. It’s extremely rewarding to see someone from the starting point, not all that confident, and follow them all the way through to being in tears because they got the job that that they were dreaming of, and then seeing what that brings to the family and children too.”

In Anoka County, Raines and Wilson say their navigators were there for them at every turn and for every difficulty. “The navigators were amazing, especially the way they worked with us and our potential employers, arranging and coaching us for interviews. Without them, I don’t think I’d have gotten an interview.”

Jeanine Christenson, Program Coordinator for the Job Training Center, fondly recalls navigating for Raines, along with Raines’ counselor at Anoka County’s Minnesota Family Investment Program, which is designed to help dependent families move toward self-sufficiency.

Christenson said her relationship with Raines has continued “after the fact” of her graduation from the program and as Raines has become a public example of its success.

“What I found is that the peer group as part of the cohort model is so critical to their success, having their peers work alongside them and share in the lows and highs of their training experience.” Christenson said. Additionally, their navigator teams with them from orientation through training to graduation and supports them throughout the entire process.

Also on Better Pathways: The Kids

All four of the Rochester and Anoka County pathfinders have children and invariably the mothers rank the improved futures of their kids as the more important consequence of their own Career Pathway success.

Fleury’s 19-year-old daughter, Angelica, is doing well and her 13-year-old son, Daniel, has already skipped a grade and seriously aspires to be a neurosurgeon. Massaglia, recently engaged to be married, says her daughter, Isabella, is off to a great start in kindergarten. Raines’ youngsters, Taylor and Micah, are doing much better and the oldest is “starting kindergarten and completely loving school.” Wilson’s daughter, 12-year-old LaShae, is feeling much more safe and secure in her new school in Fridley and she aspires to be a writer of “realistic fiction” or a fashion designer.

Given the momentous changes in her life and the prospects for her children, Raines has simple advice for those who are interested in following her path. “I would not be where I am without the Career Pathways program. If you’re in it, take it seriously.”
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.

THIS PROJECT IS MADE POSSIBLE WITH FUNDING FROM


This story series was written and researched by Growth and Justice. Photography, design and layout by Jeff Achen of CallSign51.