CREATING VVIABLE STARTING POINTS FOR CAREER PATHWAYS
WRTP/BIG STEP YOUTH PROGRAMS
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When it comes to career trajectories, where you start does shape where you finish. Repeated analyses of career earnings trajectories show that a person’s first job has important consequences for earnings even two decades later. This is cause for concern. Young Milwaukee residents face major challenges finding entry-level positions, much less high quality ones. These problems are amplified for Milwaukee’s African-American residents. Such problems motivate a closer consideration of the state of youth career development in the Milwaukee region.

One challenge is that today’s young people are almost universally encouraged to pursue a path that is often ill-suited for their goals and resources, and often fails to generate the returns promised. Four-year college has become the default path towards employment for many young people. Yet, for many this is neither a realistic nor a desired option, given the costs, the academic demands, and the actual job market. Recent research shows that tertiary degrees generate far less security for Black and Latino families.

16% of jobs in the Milwaukee economy provide over $35,000 in annual income and are filled mostly by individuals without a college degree. In turn, many of these positions are in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

The challenge is to improve the transition between secondary education and entry points into careers in the skilled trades and other middle skilled careers. Milwaukee hosts a range of public, private, and non-profit organizations providing young people with resources to support their career development. Yet, one recognized gap in this infrastructure is the provision of on-the-job experience and workforce development resources that are tailored to the demands of industry which can provide entry to these middle skill jobs.

WRTP/BIG STEP is an organization that offers a model for youth career development programming that is closely linked to industry demands and gives young people access to high quality work experience. Over the past 20 years, as part of its role as a workforce intermediary, WRTP/BIG STEP has applied the industry-driven partnership model to youth career development. The result is a set of programs that are both consistent in their attention to industry demands and diverse in the types of services they provide and youth they serve.

This report takes stock of current employment opportunities for young Milwaukee residents, highlights the limitations of existing youth career development resources, and lays out the unique youth career development model advanced by WRTP/BIG STEP. The report provides a set of case studies, illustrating the diversity of initiatives that the organization has undertaken to support Milwaukee’s youth. The conclusion offers some general points for consideration in developing an industry-led youth career development program.
As the table shows, of men aged 16-24 who are seeking employment, the younger cohorts are particularly disadvantaged. The numbers are higher for both black and white men in Milwaukee. Unsurprisingly, there are important differences across racial categories. In both age groups, and for both measures of job access, black men in Milwaukee have fewer opportunities than their white counterparts.

Those interested in widespread economic advancement for Milwaukee's residents must pay greater attention to the factors that shape youth career development and propose new ideas to improve opportunities for young people.

The ability of individuals to secure productive early-stage employment largely depends on the training, skills, and connections to potential employers they attain prior to their first employment spells. A four-year college degree has become the most commonly cited pathway to the workforce in the contemporary United States, and it is a necessary step for many stable career paths. While a four-year college degree is often treated as the only option, nearly 70% of working aged Americans do not have a college degree, and for many middle-skilled careers, a four-year degree is inappropriate.

Many individuals are not suited for careers in the types of professional fields that require four-year degrees. Their interests, learning styles, goals, and preferences direct them away from the four-year degree path, yet this alternative path receives relatively little attention. Furthermore, according to recent data from the St. Louis Federal Reserve, the benefits of a four-year degree vary substantially across racial and ethnic groups. While White and Asian workers with four-year degrees experienced smaller economic losses during the recent recession and greater wealth gains over the past 15 years, compared to their counterparts without college degrees, Black and Latino college graduates actually experienced greater economic losses and lower wealth gains than their non-college graduate counterparts.

When one examines recent employment data for the Milwaukee area, the range of career opportunities for individuals without college degrees becomes apparent. For the vast majority of jobs in Milwaukee, the modal education level for an employee is a high school degree with some additional post-secondary certificates. The chart on the following page shows the distribution of educational attainment levels among employed Milwaukeeans.

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This, of course, does not mean that all jobs that are largely filled by employees with terminal high school degrees are good jobs. Many of these jobs are retail or fast food service industry positions where the pay is far from adequate. Yet, upon closer inspection, many do provide family-supporting compensation or entry to a new partnership towards middle-income jobs. Data from the Department of Labor shows that approximately 90,000 jobs, which constitute nearly 19% of current employment in Milwaukee City, offer average salaries over $35,000 and do not require a college degree. The top employing occupations in this group are listed in the table below and longer list is included in the appendix.

In sum, this data illustrates a range of viable career paths where a terminal high school degree is an appropriate level of formal education. Upon inspection, most of the jobs on this list are in the manufacturing or construction sectors. The challenge is to ensure that low-income individuals have the opportunities to advance in these sectors.

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1 Emmons and Noeth 2015.


State of Supportive Resources for Youth Career Development in Milwaukee

Today in Milwaukee there is no shortage of organizations seeking to support career development for young people. A recent environmental scan and organizational inventory counted 42 organizations providing some combination of workforce development services for young people in the Milwaukee area. These organizations include public educational institutions like the Milwaukee Public Schools and Milwaukee Area Technical College, non-profit community organizations like the Northcott Neighborhood Center, and more targeted interest groups like Centro Hispano. These organizations provide a range of highly valued services from job training, to resume development, to career exploration opportunities, to a variety of social services. Many of these organizations explicitly target low-income and marginalized communities.

However, as documented in the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board Youth Services Environmental Scan, there are particular types of services that remain relatively inaccessible for youth in Milwaukee. Pathways to careers require job experiences and training that is closely integrated with the demands of future jobs. Training must be tailored to occupations, credentials, and pathways. The report acknowledged that relatively few organizations in the Milwaukee region provide on-the-job experiences that can help young individuals transition from formal education to their first job placement. Furthermore, from that environmental scan, few of the organizations listed had close ties to industry stakeholders or maintained an explicit focus on the demands of industry.

Relatively few organizations in the Milwaukee region provide on-the-job experiences that can help young individuals transition from formal education to their first job placement.

WRTP/BIG STEP and Its Role in Youth Career Development

WRTP/BIG STEP serves as a hub for employers and labor unions seeking to develop a more capable workforce, and workers seeking careers in these sectors. It is governed by a Board of stakeholders from both sectors, and from both labor and management. The organization also convenes a body of partnering community organizations to whom it turns to recruit participants and collaborate on wider development projects. WRTP/BIG STEP organizes apprenticeship preparation, coordinates worker registration for public residency-based hiring requirements, and runs an alternative staffing agency that facilitates transitions from temporary to permanent positions. Because this organization is so deeply involved in industry activities, it is well suited to fill that gap in the region’s youth career development space.

WRTP/BIG STEP’s current involvement in the youth career development space and its programming is consistent with its industry-driven multi-stakeholder character. Each project relies on collaboration with WRTP/BIG STEP’s network of stakeholders and explicitly, seeks to strengthen that network. At the same time, these projects are diverse in their customization to the students served. While some programs serve court-involved youth who are at the earliest stages of career development, other programs provide more sophisticated training to students who have already identified a particular career path and are nearly ready to enter a formal apprenticeship program. WRTP/BIG STEP’s pipeline model simultaneously integrates consistency and diversity.

Because programs target particular sectors and provide credentialed skills, students who complete one program can more easily advance into more advanced programs and, ultimately, into adult training programs. In the following section, we present a set of case studies that illustrate the types of youth career development programs that WRTP/BIG STEP supports.
CASE STUDIES

The following set of case studies draws from recently completed, ongoing, and upcoming youth career development projects administered by WRTP/BIG STEP. They illustrate the range of youth career development programs currently or recently implemented by WRTP/BIG STEP and, in particular, the simultaneous consistency and diversity of the programs.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH PROGRAM

This is one of WRTP/BIG STEP’s largest and most established youth career development programs, providing individuals with links to high school completion, job readiness training, industry exposure, and career counseling.

Participants must be between the ages of 18 and 20, and must have an educational deficit (no diploma, significant work readiness barriers). Participants both take part in a range of training programs and are matched with an employer partner for a 20 hour per week paid work experience. They are also required to take a set of assessment tests that evaluate skills and career interests and receive tutoring if they are not successful in their first attempt. In 2015, 60 individuals entered the program and 23 individuals were placed in employer organizations.

When an individual enters the program, they develop an Individual Service Strategy with a program counselor, which identifies job goals, obstacles to employment, and particular career interests. Once entered, they participate in a range of trainings including an introduction to WRTP/BIG STEP, a healthy relationships workshop, job readiness training, and career development. In turn, program counselors match participants to employment opportunities in organizations, according to their level of career readiness and their interests.

One of the program’s greatest strengths is its ability to match out-of-school youth with employment opportunities in the particular industries of their choice. Because of WRTP/BIG STEP’s name recognition and positive reputation in the Milwaukee business community, previously uninvolved employers have been responsive to case managers’ offers to place these youth.

BRIDGING SECONDARY EDUCATION TO SKILLED TRADERS CAREERS

Funded by the Caterpillar Foundation, this program simultaneously engages community organizations, business partners, high school teachers, and students, to improve the bridge between secondary education and skilled trades careers in Milwaukee. The program is unique to WRTP/BIG STEP’s range of programs, in that it partners closely with area high schools and middle schools, and serves largely as a resource for those schools. In 2015, 236 students received some career preparation training through the program and approximately 20 schools participated.

This program has several components. First, program organizers convene private sector employers to encourage their participation in youth career development programming and solicit their views on industry demands for future employees. Second, organizers develop relationships with teachers and trades instructors as a means to both identify promising students and provide these teachers access to additional resources to enhance curricula. These resources include opportunities for fieldtrips to worksites, mock interviews and interview preparation, career fairs, in-class presentations on careers in the trades, and job shadowing. Some events serve specific schools and some events bring multiple schools together, as in the case of career fairs held at community-based organizations and expo centers.

Though other community organizations also collaborate with area secondary educational institutions for early career development programming, WRTP/BIG STEP is unique in its strong connections to industry and the rich exposure it can provide students. If students are interested in manufacturing, WRTP/BIG STEP can leverage its industry connections and bring students to a range of firms, from highly specialized custom fabrication shops, to continuous process production facilities, to discrete production plants. One WRTP/BIG STEP administrator pointed out that students often start with a very narrow view of what working in manufacturing means, and the program provides a broader, more well-rounded view of industries. This program is distinct among WRTP/BIG STEP’s youth career development programs in the range of young people it serves.

OAK CREEK SCHOOL PROJECT

This program, getting underway in Fall 2015 and to be completed in the summer of 2016, seeks to provide formal construction training and certification to high school students in a construction trades program, with the goal to facilitate their transition into a formal apprenticeship program. The program is unique from WRTP/BIG STEP’s other youth career development projects in that it targets more skilled students and emphasizes the preparation of youth for industry needs. The youth participating in this program have already identified that they want to be involved, at some level, in the construction industry; before applying, they must have taken at least four technical education classes.

Students participate in a full house construction, receive a range of certifications, and gain assistance with career development. Students work side-by-side with professionals from the building trades and contractor firms to plan and carry out the entire construction process. Through WRTP/BIG STEP, students receive Entry Level Construction Skills, OSHA 10, First Aid/CPR, Asbestos Awareness, Lead Abatement, and Fork Lift License certifications.

This program illustrates how the WRTP/BIG STEP youth career development model can be adapted to serve both less and more advanced students. With its capacity to provide credentialed trainings and its relationships to professional trade organizations in the construction sector, WRTP/BIG STEP is able to enhance the sophistication of training provided to young career entrants.
CONSTRUCTION ACADEMY FOR YOUTH—MADISON

This program, carried out in Summer 2015, is part of WRTP/BIG STEP’s recently increased presence in Madison, Wisconsin. It illustrates the type of early-stage youth career development program that WRTP/BIG STEP uses to strengthen relationships between stakeholders. For the project, WRTP/BIG STEP partnered with the City of Madison, Madison Public Schools, and the Building Trades Council of South Central Wisconsin. One WRTP/BIG STEP employee described the program as helping to “build the youth component of the industry workforce pipeline”.

Two one-week long educational programs brought together high school students from across Madison and provided them the opportunity to learn about, and receive training from a range of construction trade unions in the Madison area. At the outset, WRTP/BIG STEP met with area high schools and community organizations to expand awareness about industry-driven youth career development opportunities, re-establish linkages between the schools and trade unions, and recruit students and inform parents. WRTP/BIG STEP also partnered with the YWCA of Madison to serve as the program’s day-to-day coordinator.

Given that resistance from parents and educators is often a key obstacle for youth to get into the trades, these stakeholders were invited to participate in recruitment and orientation sessions. Each day of the week-long program, the students visited a different construction trade training center and received a hands-on educational experience. Trainers from each of the trades designed a unique curriculum that introduced the students to the individual trades. Interspersed with the daily training center visits, students also received some information about career development strategies and the apprenticeship model.

A key goal of the program was to reinforce ties between area schools and trade unions, in order to encourage future collaborations between these stakeholders around youth career development. Students who expressed interest in construction were recruited to participate, field visits focused exclusively on a range of career paths in that sector and trade unions were invited to organize curricula aligned with their skill demands.

The program is distinct from other WRTP/BIG STEP programs because it explicitly sought to strengthen the relationships between stakeholders and develop an industry-based infrastructure.

CONSTRUCTION ACADEMY FOR YOUTH—MILWAUKEE

This employment and training program was offered to youth, between 16 and 19, receiving food subsidies (Food Share) in the Milwaukee region. The week long program served two classes of individuals, recruited through ResCare (the private contractor managing food subsidies in Milwaukee County), current youth programs like the Making Milwaukee Work for Youth Initiative, and through the WRTP/BIG STEP Youth Career Counseling Facebook page. This program is distinct in its attempt to provide a more advanced training program that is closely integrated with the building trades and formal apprenticeship programs. This program exclusively focused in the construction sector and relied on the building trades as a key partner.

This week-long program started at the WRTP/BIG STEP facility, where students received orientation to WRTP/BIG STEP programming, job readiness training, and OSHA 10 training. The remainder of the week, students toured union training halls and learned about careers in the construction trades. At the union halls, they learned about the apprenticeship process and received hands-on exposure to work in the different trades.

This program is also unique in that it attempted to more closely link WRTP/BIG STEP’s programming for adults with its youth career development training, by involving the trade unions and focusing on apprenticeship programs. The hope is to filter program participants into careers in the trades and, therefore, participation in WRTP/BIG STEP’s adult programs that assist workers in entering into apprenticeship programs.
**TechTerns PROJECT**

The TechTerns project provided eighteen students from Bradley Technical High School in Milwaukee with a comprehensive two and a half year project-based learning experience in the construction, healthcare, and architecture industries. This was an intensive collaboration between Mortensen Construction, Cannon Design, Froedert Hospital, the Medical College of Wisconsin, Bradley Technology and Trade School, and WRTP/BIG STEP.

As part of their efforts to meet community outreach requirements for the design and construction of a new medical campus in Wauwatosa, Mortensen Construction, Froedert Hospital, and Cannon Design initiated the TechTerns project. The curriculum was organized so that students would learn about experience, and participate in all stages of the new hospital construction process in real time. Teachers and counselors selected eighteen motivated sophomores to participate in the program based on academic performance and exemplary in-school behavior. The group visited the construction site or a related manufacturing facility twice per semester over two and a half years. Each visit included a tour of the site or facility, a lecture from the relevant organization’s representative, and hands on activities to give the students a sense of the types of work involved. For example, during one session, the students attended a presentation from Cannon Architects on the use of three-dimensional modeling in building design and then participated in a demonstration of robotic surveying equipment with construction trades workers. Students learned about a range of topics from career trajectories in the different industries to the technical challenges of complex construction projects. Students also developed individual relationships with professionals from the different organizations involved. Nearly a half dozen students were offered summer internships by outside employers.

WRTP/BIG STEP served as the intermediary organization, helping to coordinate between the different stakeholders. Two case managers from WRTP/BIG STEP escorted the students on each trip, provided career readiness preparation, helped students prepare for internship interviews, and managed the logistics of the program. WRTP/BIG STEP is now working with other stakeholders to replicate this model in other contexts.

What makes the TechTerns Program special is its ability to provide a ‘wider-lens’ exposure to career opportunities and helping students to form networks that will facilitate their career development.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE YOUTH CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING**

This analysis of career/job preparation in Southeast Milwaukee demonstrates that organizations engaged in youth career development in Milwaukee need to improve their alignment with the demands of industry. Careers in manufacturing and construction offer a viable pathway to stable family-supporting wages, and many opportunities remain in the Milwaukee region. However, the pathways between formal secondary education and entry points into careers in the skilled trades must be improved. In particular, young people need more direct and targeted exposure to these jobs, both to improve their understanding of these careers and to develop networks that may lead to jobs down the road. Relatedly, these individuals need skills that are consistent with industry demands.

As an industry intermediary, these are the types of programs for which WRTP/BIG STEP is well suited. As the case studies above illustrate, an industry and multi-stakeholder driven organization is best able to provide such services due to close relationships with professionals in these industries and the wide range of resources to which it has access. Because WRTP/BIG STEP is involved with the full spectrum of worker development, from youths to senior tradespeople, it increases the likelihood that an individual’s involvement in a youth program will translate into future success along the career path. Frequently, participants in one program continue to participate in multiple programs and meet organizations who will eventually serve as their employer or labor representative. At the same time, and as the case studies illustrate, the WRTP/BIG STEP model can be adapted to serve a more or less central role, depending on the type of client and the other partners involved.

As a means of conclusion, the following is a set of general proposals for future industry-driven youth career development work, whether by WRTP/BIG STEP or by other organizations:

1. Central to the industry-driven model is network building. Each youth career development project offers, not only an opportunity to develop the skills and credentials of young job seekers, but also to strengthen ties between stakeholders who are all connected to an industry. When the immediate funding stream is exhausted, strong ties will sustain these collaborations.

2. Adjust the sophistication of programming based on the capabilities of participants, recognizing that participants can transition into more advanced trainings over time. Because industry-driven organizations explicitly envision the skilled trades as an endpoint, one risk of industry-driven career development is that young individuals with serious obstacles face unrealistic expectations. For example, individuals with serious educational deficiencies may require substantial remedial tutoring and supportive services before on-the-job work experience will be beneficial to them or the employer. To address this need, WRTP/BIG STEP has established partnerships with key educational/literacy organizations such as Literacy Services of Wisconsin.
Relatedly, industry-driven organizations must recognize their strengths and limitations. Because these organizations are not generally specialized in supporting at-risk youth, industry-driven organizations must carefully select partners who are better suited.

Central to the value of the industry partnership model is the ability to link program participants with further training upon program completion. Thus, graduates of one program may be ideally suited to participate in a more advanced program. This, in turn, brings them closer to entry into formal apprenticeship programs.

A key obstacle to youth career development is resistance from stakeholders who see four-year degrees as the universal goal. Programs must seek to change perceptions about careers in the trades and careers that do not require four-year college degrees. This entails engaging with and developing programming to educate parents, educators, community organizations, and even funders.

**CITATIONS**


**Appendix:**

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THANK YOU

We wish to thank Bader Philanthropies for their generous support that helped underwrite the research coalescing for this report written by the Center on Wisconsin Strategies (COWS).

WRTP/BIG STEP will continue to address and respond to the youth in the communities in which it is located. Stay tuned for current youth initiatives by: