



# THE PATH TO SUCCESS

Career Pathways are an innovative approach to job training that show great promise for addressing both racial disparities in workforce outcomes and a looming skilled labor shortage in Minnesota.

## PART I: THE PATHFINDERS

**YUSHICA BRYANT** exudes a sunny competence and a poised professionalism that belie her 21 years. She smiles effortlessly, leans forward when she listens and gets to the point when she talks.

With a two-year associate's degree in Human Services already under her belt, and already earning close to \$40,000 a year as a Hennepin County Human Services Representative, she has every reason to be confident about her further ambitions. Her new goals include buying a home by 25 and earning a four-year degree at either the College of Saint Scholastica or Metropolitan State University.

Little in her life story up until two years ago suggested any of this was likely.

Bryant was removed from the custody of her mother



YUSHICA BRYANT

by the authorities when she was four months old, for reasons she says she still doesn't know. For the first 15 years of her life, she shuttled back and forth between living with her grandmother in Greenville, Mississippi, and living with her father in the Twin Cities.

"We moved so often it was really hard to build anything or get ahead in school," she recalls. She says that of about 80 people in her extended family in Mississippi and Minnesota, only about five have graduated from high school and only she and one other have a postsecondary degree.

Despite all that adversity, she managed to get a taste for college work, building her confidence through Minnesota's highly regarded Postsecondary

Enrollment Options program. She took a few college-level courses and graduated on time from Brooklyn Center High School. And despite giving birth to a child at 18 (Zamarrion, now three), Bryant managed to get started, on her own, at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC).

For a while in her teens and in college, Bryant supported herself working at a national burger chain, even becoming a manager, but she was still paid a near-poverty wage. As she struggled to work and attend MCTC, Bryant said she wasn't sure whether or how her courses would translate to a career and better job. She had some pieces in place but they weren't really fitting together.

Then, a couple years ago, Bryant spotted an advertisement on Craigslist for the Hennepin County Human Services Career Pathway program. "I linked to a brochure that offered free college credit, AND an internship, AND a possible hiring, and I thought 'WOW!'"

Bryant had stumbled upon a relatively new initiative known more broadly as Hennepin Workforce, a joint effort of Hennepin County, Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) and Project for Pride in Living (PPL), a highly effective nonprofit social service provider for low-income people.

Anticipating a massive turnover in staff in the next few years, the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners approved a plan in May of 2014 to partner with local educational institutions and community-based organizations to build a more diverse workforce to replace the nearly 2,200 Hennepin County employees who will be retirement-eligible in the next four years. The Human Service Representative position was one of the first to be opened up to the new pathway model and Bryant was one of the very first graduates of the new program.

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The Career Pathway approach worked for Bryant. It shows promise for tens of thousands of young people like her, including many from communities of color, who start college every year in Minnesota only to drop out, no closer to the



career they dreamed of when they started.

Bryant at least had a taste of college in high school, could read and speak English, and was familiar with American culture and customs. For thousands of others, including immigrants and their children, there are additional obstacles. Learning English or navigating Minnesota's distinctive culture — from snow emergency rules to the bureaucratic maze of the nonprofit and governmental social service system — can be deal-breakers on the way to credentials. The stories of Kushe Saw and Mekuanent Kassa, beneficiaries of the College Readiness Academy partnership between healthcare employers, Saint Paul College, and the International Institute of Minnesota, are a testament to the effectiveness of the Career Pathway model for these newcomers.



**KUSHE SAW** is a soft-spoken but determined 45-year-old mother of three. Originally from Burma, she spent most of her youth literally running for her life from an abusive military junta that has persecuted her people, the Karen (pronounced ka-WREN), for decades. She was separated from her biological parents at an early age and traveled with adoptive parents and extended family.

“We were always on the run, many times hungry, always in fear,” Saw recalls. “We never knew when the Burmese soldiers would come and try to kill us. Everywhere we went, we tried to attend school but I only learned a little, here and there.”

When Saw first arrived in the United States, in Louisiana, she remembers feeling as if she had arrived

in a paradise. “It was like heaven, because, first, it was safe, and there was food. People brought you food. I had never seen ice cream before. There were lots of clothes to wear. And nobody bothered you.”

Although she didn't speak any English, Saw managed to get a job and worked for two years at a restaurant owned by a Chinese couple. She began to apply herself further, earning her GED in Louisiana. She then endured several years of nightmarish efforts to reunite with her husband, who had escaped Burma by way of Canada. Bureaucratic roadblocks prevented his entry, so Saw moved to Minnesota in part to be closer to her husband, who lived for a time in Thunder Bay,

Ontario, not far from the Minnesota border. Eventually they reunited and settled in the Twin Cities, happily discovering that Minnesota was becoming home to the largest Karen population in the world outside of Burma.

Saw learned early upon her arrival that the International Institute of Minnesota was a refuge and a godsend for new immigrants to Minnesota. With the help of its resources, she got her current job at a nursing home in the Saint Anthony Park neighborhood of Saint Paul almost 11 years ago. Since then, she has been tenaciously acquiring credits and credentials, entirely through the International Institute and Saint

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**KUSHE SAW**

Paul College's Career Pathway program.

In December of 2015, after almost a decade of dogged persistence, and while raising a family, Saw finally got her Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) degree. She has yet to pass the state boards, but hopes to move up soon in the nursing field, either with her current employer or another hospital or clinic. Her children (Hteemoo, 14; Jeremiah, 12; and Hannah, 6) are in programs for gifted children in the Saint Paul Public Schools system, where her husband works for early childhood programs.

Saw is immensely grateful for the Career Pathway trail blazed

for her by others. “In America, to find a good job you have to have a resumé. You just can’t jump to college right away...so many barriers, so many rules, so much paperwork. And I couldn’t have done it on my own. I’m very blessed. My children will be educated and they will have lots of choices.”

While Saw’s odyssey to overcome a background with little formal education has been remarkable, barriers exist even for those Minnesotans who have had extensive education in their original homeland. Many find it nearly impossible to get credit for that training. Such was the case with Mekuanent Kassa.



**MEKUANENT KASSA** had just arrived in Washington, D.C., from Ethiopia, when Al-Qaeda terrorists flew American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon. Having been granted political asylum, he lived not far from the crash and would never forget seeing the smoke and wreckage.

The experience informed his deep patriotism. “I love the way you can just change your life in this country, and living here changed a lot of things for me,” he says. “There are big opportunities everywhere, I love this country.” Kassa proudly became a U.S. citizen in 2012.

Despite Washington, D.C. having the largest concentration of Ethiopians in the U.S., Kassa said he immediately preferred Minnesota when he first visited. “I like the generosity of the people. I didn’t have winter clothes and people here wherever I go, they help you out, they give you directions. I’ve had no bad experiences in Minnesota.” Like Saw, he learned

early upon his arrival in Minnesota, in 2002, about the International Institute of Minnesota and that “many Ethiopians were being served.”

Although he had a good education in Ethiopia and even attended some college there, none of the credits transferred. And so he started out the way many relatively educated immigrants do in the U.S., working alongside less educated citizens and immigrants, for about \$7 an hour in gas stations and retail outlets.

He tried going to college but found himself in a cycle of “work, pay, work, pay, work, pay” and owing \$6,500 but with no degree or credential and no good job in sight. Then he got a break and found his Career Pathway.

Kassa had enjoyed taking care of his grandparents in Ethiopia and discovered through career assessments at the International Institute that he was a good fit for a nursing program. He gradually advanced through the International Institute’s College Readiness Academy, obtaining enough language instruction and coursework to qualify to become a nursing assistant. Since then he’s been on a steady progression, working at nursing homes and hospitals while picking up a Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) degree from Saint Paul College. He continues to take courses in his quest to eventually acquire an Registered Nursing (RN) degree.

Kassa now earns about \$22 an hour working part-time while attending school when he can.

It’s a rigorous schedule that sometimes keeps him working all night and going to school all day. He notes with pride that he started out making \$7 an hour in Washington, D.C.

“I am very thankful, for all my teachers’ knowledge, for hospitality and their kindness,” Kassa says of all the partners who helped him along the pathway, a program which he describes as “the place that opened my eyes.”

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MEKUANENT KASSA

## PART II: THE PATHMAKERS

**THE PATHWAYS** for Bryant, Saw and Kassa were blazed through a wilderness of overlapping education and training programs. The trail-builders say it has taken years of careful program design and the remarkable cooperation of 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 back almost a decade to efforts to provide welfare recipients with job training and faster paths 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 the 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 a high degree of effectiveness. Almost 90 percent of FastTRAC participants have completed a college credit or obtained a credential; 75 percent who completed a 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 \$3 million in FastTRAC funding over two years. Shortly after the 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 public dashboard on the website of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to standardize outcome reporting for adult education and workforce training programs and increase transparency. 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 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 his supplemental budget proposal to the Minnesota Legislature, Governor Mark Dayton in March of 2016 requested an additional \$4.1 million for Pathways to Prosperity as one of his key proposals to address racial employment disparities.

The pathmaking partnerships that served Bryant, Saw and Kassa are essentially triads, comprised of an employer partner, a postsecondary education partner and a navigator partner. Key leaders of each triad describe their ongoing relationships with each other as trustful, equal, and centered on the success of the student or trainee/employee.

Large employers or sectors of employment, such as healthcare providers, are crucial partners in the triad. These employers make actual commitments to hire the pathfinders or give them preferential consideration. The key employer for Bryant is Hennepin County government, and for Saw and Kassa and others in their pathway program, it's a collection of various Twin Cities healthcare employers, especially nursing homes and assisted living facilities for the elderly.

The educator partners in the triads are the largest public two-year colleges in both Minneapolis and Saint Paul, namely Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) for Bryant and Saint Paul College for Saw and Kassa. Without some amount of skills training and credentials by accredited colleges, most of the better career paths are simply not in reach.

The third indispensable partner, fully important as the other two, are highly experienced nonprofit social service agencies. These agencies are proficient in adult education and literacy and have been working for decades to improve the condition and self-sufficiency of low-income Minnesotans, immigrants, and communities of color. For Bryant, this third partner was Project for Pride in Living, and for Saw and Kassa, it was the International Institute of Minnesota. Both organizations partner with Adult Basic Education to sharpen basic skills in math and English, while arranging an array of supports from public assistance to transportation.

### THE EMPLOYERS

Experts on the Career Pathway model agree that employer partnership and ownership is indispensable to the best state-of-the-art models. This buy-in consists not only of helping design the curriculum



and specifying the knowledge and abilities needed of employees, but also committing to hire or provide internships or apprenticeships to those who successfully complete the programs.

One of the challenges that low-income Minnesotans face when they take the risk and incur the expense of going to college is that their educational journey often lacks a clear or specific destination.

They often spend down their federal Pell grant or state tuition aid money taking introductory or remedial courses, and don't have enough credits or money to continue through to completion.

That was Bryant's concern at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) before she found the Career Pathway model. Once in the new program, Bryant recalls being immediately impressed about how her classes at Project for Pride in Living (PPL) and MCTC fit together to prepare her for a specific job. She says she took courses in "multicultural aspects (learning about the county's myriad ethnic cultures), an introduction to human services, customer service training (about which she knew some from working at the burger chain), and keyboarding." And rather than borrowing money or spending down the minimal income and savings she had, the entire program was free.

Bryant's program had a clear destination in large part because it was launched by Hennepin County specifically to change its hiring practices to build a more diverse and inclusive county workforce that reflects the community it serves. County officials had projected that they would lose almost 30 percent of their workers to retirement by 2020 and more than 40 percent by 2025. Amid this challenge, the county has become more explicit about targeting its hiring efforts to address economic disparities where they exist by place, by race, or life circumstance.

All parties involved in the new partnership were aware that some county job classifications did not actually require the level of college attainment and experience that had been a prerequisite. A crucial concept took hold: the county, MCTC and PPL could collaborate to find promising young adults who were under-educated and under-employed, help them obtain an initial level of credits and credentials, hire

them for entry-level for jobs, and encourage and support them in seeking higher credentials once they got established in their jobs.

"The excitement around this," says County Administrator David Hough, "is that we were able to identify individuals that could benefit significantly by training (but had) never been given the opportunity to pursue specialized training without acquiring debt."

Hennepin County officials say that Bryant is doing very well, up to par with previous hires. She has her sights on a B.A. degree and training that will move her into child protection work. More significantly, county officials report that the new cohort of human service workers coming on board through Career Pathways are doing just as well on performance and retention as those hired conventionally, with the added benefits of greater diversity and workers who relate better to clients.

"I know this is going to be successful because I've watched the graduates," Hough adds. "I've interacted with our new employees and I've seen the enthusiasm with our partners," Hennepin County is so impressed with its success that it is studying some 400 other kinds of jobs for adaptability to the Career Pathway model. Efforts also are underway to expand the model to private-sector areas of need in Hennepin County.

For Saw and Kassa and others in the healthcare pathway through the International Institute of Minnesota and Saint Paul College, raves are similarly high.

"We were instantly impressed by the quality of the workers from International Institute," says Mona Salazar, director of the nursing staff at the Saint Anthony Park Home, just a couple miles up Como Avenue from the International Institute's headquarters. The Home has been partnering with the International Institute for about 15 years, and has gradually improved the coordination of its training programs to accommodate workers from other cultures.

For instance, because language barriers present a challenge for nursing assistants who need to communicate with the elderly residents, the Home staff offers English classes that are "contextualized" around medical terminology and geriatric care. And because the Saint Anthony Park Home serves as a clinical training site for the pathway program, staff can spot the more promising prospects for eventual hiring.

According to Salazar, Saw is one of the very best of the

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Career Pathway hires, and continues to improve as she stacks up more training and credentials.

“She’s such a beautiful person, inside and out,” Salazar said. She’s caring and conscientious, hard-working, a natural care-giver. She was initially very shy and it’s been really neat to see her blossom and get more confident in her skills.”

## THE EDUCATORS

Mike Christenson, an Associate Vice President at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, is one of Minnesota’s most enthusiastic salesmen for Career Pathways models and partnerships. As a former executive of a healthcare corporation and the former director of economic development for the City of Minneapolis, he knows the business end of the pathway like few other people in the state.

And as a key enabler of Bryant’s success, he sees her progress as vindication of the model: “We’ve cracked the code. We know how to do this, and we are doing it.”

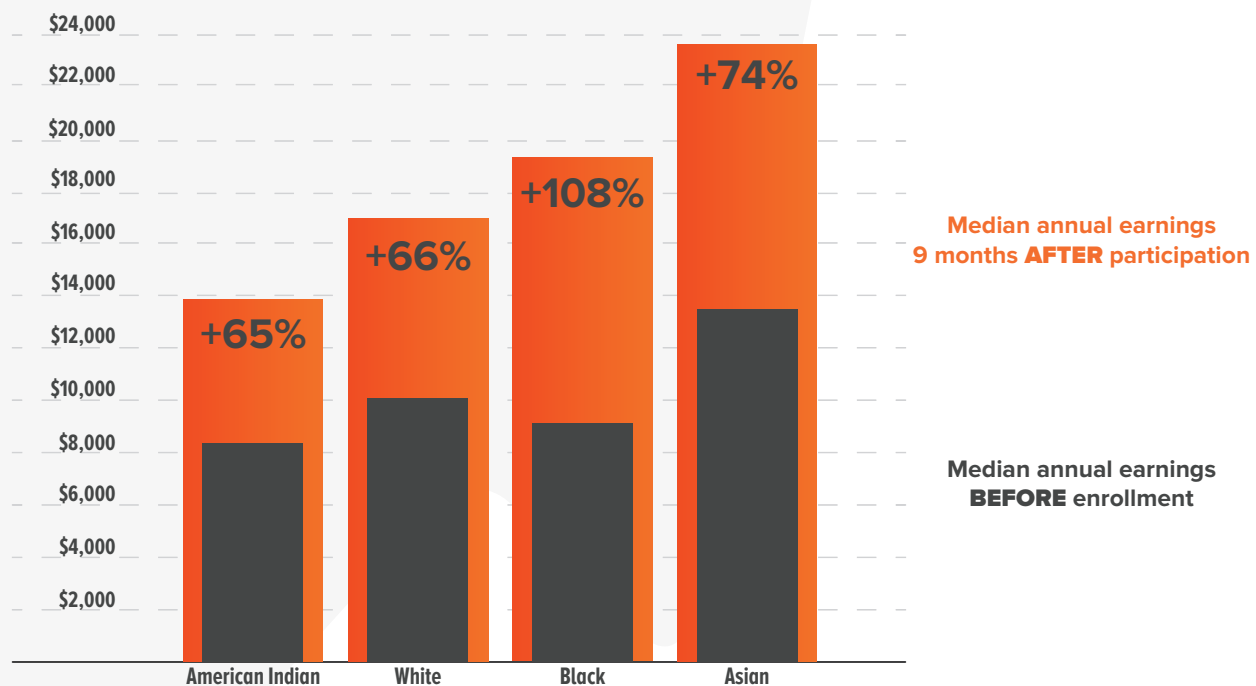
But to do more, Christenson says, “we must ask for changes of behavior from the employer, the educator and the student. The employer must delete unjustified minimum qualifications and launch internship programs. Educators must accelerate programs into

a year or less to put students in a \$20.00 an hour job, and then stack other credentials. Students must pursue a college credential and accept the structure of a career pathway.”

Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), Saint Paul College and the more highly diverse community and technical colleges in the Twin Cities area appear to be at the forefront of efforts to accommodate and accelerate low-income students of color. A recent Saint Paul Pioneer Press article summarized a variety of innovations and new supports underway including “everything from work-study jobs and housing referrals to cash for child care and on-campus food banks. Many schools have retrained select faculty and staff on how to interact with students in poverty, as well.” The Pioneer Press reported that 36 percent of all Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) students are now eligible for Pell grants, up from 23 percent just a decade ago.

Indeed, all involved agree that changes in attitudes and structures at two-and four-year colleges are necessary and overdue. Bryant, Saw and Kassa all reported great difficulty in their efforts outside the Career Pathway umbrella and said they were not at all likely to get any degree or credential without the help of steady and fiercely loyal advocates and navigators at Project for Pride in Living and the International

## Earnings Before and After Participation in FastTRAC



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.

Institute of Minnesota.

Saw, in particular, remembers that despite the help she got through the College Readiness Academy and acquiring a GED, “my preparedness was way too low and I still struggled...I needed help all the way.” Bureaucratic obstacles at college, such as being placed 102<sup>nd</sup> on a waiting list, Saw says, were among the barriers she finally overcame through the Career Pathways program.

## THE NAVIGATORS

In a recent pep talk to an MCTC class comprising the next batch of human service representative pathfinders like Bryant, Julie Brekke, Senior Vice President of Employment Readiness at Project for Pride in Living (PPL), exhorted about 25 students not to forget that PPL staff and personal “navigators” were standing by to help. “Give us a shout,” Brekke said. “Trail-blaze away and go forward, but fall back on us and lean on us. This is a family that supports you, and we know you can do it.”

Bryant, Saw and Kassa repeatedly emphasize that nonprofit organizations that have a unique understanding of their cultural and racial distinctiveness are important home bases for support and ongoing help.

Minnesota is blessed with many high-achieving nonprofits that serve disadvantaged populations, but Project for Pride in Living (PPL) may be one of the most celebrated. It describes itself as “dedicated to empowering low-income people to become self-reliant

through integrated services,” including housing, employment training, support services and education. PPL originated as an affordable housing developer in 1972, and has since become a robust multi-service agency that today serves more than 13,000 low-income people annually. Its latest strategic plan calls for realignment to focus on its two strongest capabilities, supportive housing and employment readiness programs. Along with the International Institute of Minnesota, which served Saw and Kassa, it may be one of the state’s leading sources of know-how on Career Pathway development.

Bryant speaks with reverence for PPL navigators. She got help and tutoring with her difficult academic work, Bryant said, but her biggest challenge came in the form of a high-risk pregnancy that ultimately ended in a miscarriage. She was sick and hospitalized for days at a time and very close to dropping out.

*“Trail-blaze away and go forward, but fall back on us and lean on us. This is a family that supports you, and we know you can do it.”*

“The PPL staff and my peers were unbelievable,” she says with emotion. “They were all so supportive, they helped me catch back up, and they actually prayed for me too.” That kind of warm personal support and the esprit de corps that Career Pathway designers seek to instill in each cohort

## 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.



of students are some of the most important elements of the program. Bryant remains in regular contact with several close friends she met in the program who are now colleagues in county government.

May Xiong, Director of Employment Training Programs for PPL, says the services rendered include some obvious things like arranging help with child care and transportation, and sometimes crucial personal interventions like phone calls from PPL staff to MCTC instructors to explain why a student is missing from class or to make a plea for more time on a work assignment. The moral support can involve tough talk for the students themselves, with admonishments toward working harder and persisting.

Saw and Kassa are as reverent about the International Institute of Minnesota as Bryant is for Project for Pride in Living. They describe the Institute's facility as almost a second home, a friendly place for services and interpreters and advice and just plain sympathy.

Saw said she found out about the Institute shortly after her arrival in 2002 and that its services have been instrumental in her progress every step of the way. At several points in her journey, facing legal obstacles or failures to pass courses or tests, the Institute found a workaround. When put on a waiting list for a degree program, for instance, Saw said the Institute enrolled her in a course for a certification as a phlebotomist (those who draw blood for tests or transfusions) so that she was able to continue on a course toward credential attainment. Kassa said services at the Institute included help with tuition, language, and legal problems he stills faces in efforts to get his wife, Hiwot, and son, Senay, out of Ethiopia and reunited with him in Minnesota.

Among its many moving parts, the Institute's College Readiness Academy was the key program that helped them get credentials. In the very simple words of the College Readiness Academy's brochure, its free classes can: help save up to \$2,500 in college costs, strengthen reading and writing and math skills, build study skills, teach how the college system works, and do planning one-on-one with a navigator.

The role of the navigators, the actual people who provide up-close help and warm personal support, can't be overstated as an ingredient for successful Career Pathway models.

Students often benefit from more than one navigator, and for Bryant, Alana McDevitt, an employment specialist at PPL, was one of those saviors. McDevitt recalls working intensively with Bryant, sorting through the difficulties of her high-risk pregnancy, "working with instructors on scheduling, getting bus and gas cards for her, and being her confidante." One



Pathfinders say their "navigators" - people like Alana McDevitt with Project for Pride in Living (left), Fatima Omar (center) and Andrea Morgan (right) with International Institute - were crucial intermediaries in overcoming academic and personal problems.

key lesson Alana says she has learned was "to check my white privilege at the door."

At PPL, Fatima Omar and Andrea Morgan are impressive young professionals in their 20s whose business cards actually carry the label "College Navigator." Working as a team, they oversee about 70 active College Readiness Academy students who are following in the footsteps of Saw and Kassa. Morgan says she can recall working as long as eight hours with just one student filling out a FAFSA form for student aid. Fatima recalled helping one new student learn very simple things like where to park at college and how to buy books and how "these little things actually prevent some people from continuing to completion."

All three of these pathfinders confess to current and ongoing difficulties as they strive upward in Minnesota and toward a future that was unlikely just a few years ago. All are really just beginning on their pathways, but they can now see more clearly where they lead. Bryant sums up this challenge and their new confidence:

"I struggled a lot when I first started at this job and I still do. There was a new dress code and I had to learn how to talk in a certain way and sometimes I'd get discouraged and overwhelmed. I was very excited when I first got here and I thought everybody was my friend and nothing bad happens. I learned that was not necessarily true." "But I worked hard to get here," Bryant adds emphatically. "And I do belong here."



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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