

The struggle to help people find better jobs

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Across Des Moines, workforce and education programs are working to help people, including minorities, who are unemployed and underemployed find better-paying jobs.

But such programs can't fully offset the underlying causes of inequality, said Darrick Hamilton, a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York.

Social programs sometimes operate under the “narratives that blacks need to work harder, study harder and change their behavior,” he said.

Hamilton said his research suggests the black-white wealth gap isn't driven by choice or behavior.

Blacks are just as likely to save money as whites, if not more so.

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But his research shows a black head of household who is college educated has on average \$10,000 less in wealth than a white head of household who is a high school dropout. And a black full-time worker will have less family wealth than an unemployed white person.

“Studying hard doesn’t address the wealth gap,” Hamilton said. “Working hard doesn’t address the wealth gap.”

While some academics trace the racial wealth gap back to slavery, Hamilton identifies more recent culprits.

He said federal housing programs and policies such as the G.I. Bill helped to build white assets following the Great Depression and World War II. Many white Americans were able to buy their own homes, which appreciated in value over time. But those programs were not always open to all, he said.

“In most instances, blacks were excluded,” he said. “This was a problem that did not generically happen.”

Today, across central Iowa, programs are aimed at helping people of all races help themselves. Some examples:

Central Iowa Works: 'Bridging the gulf'

Pat Steele would like to do more.

Steele, the director of Central Iowa Works, said the workforce program helped 181 people find new jobs in 2014. Another 257 received raises or promotions after going through its classes.



Central Iowa Works, a “workforce intermediary,” is designed to bridge the gulf between workforce needs and the available talent pool by training the underemployed or unemployed.

Like many education and workforce programs across the city that work with high-minority populations, Central Iowa Works takes a slow-and-steady approach. The classes of 10 to 20 people are intentionally small to provide individual coaching.

“You’d like to have a larger scale, because the numbers that are needed are so overwhelming,” Steele said, “but if you’re trying to do the personalized, intense support people need, you’ve got to watch your numbers.”

Still, only about two-thirds of those who enroll in the free classes finish. Many are derailed by personal, family and work obligations and distractions.

“It’s just the population we work with. They oftentimes have multiple barriers and life situations,” Steele said. “We can’t just take somebody and pluck them into the classroom and think that’s all they need.”

[Iowa's wealth gap: It's black and white](#)

DMACC: Pursuing a diploma

It’s a similar story for the high school equivalency program at Des Moines Area Community College. Tyrone Hunt says only about 35 percent of the students who enter the program earn their diploma.

The GED-style program (now called the HiSET) essentially compacts years of high school coursework into a few months. But that’s not why most leave.

“The No. 1 thing is personal issues,” Hunt said.

Statewide, completion rates are even lower.

Between July 2014 and June 2015, 12,304 students across Iowa completed at least 12 hours of adult education. But only 3,189 took at least one of the five required exams.

And only 1,942 students received their diploma — about 16 percent of those who began.

Blacks represent 19 percent of those who begin courses, but they represent just 10 percent of those who receive diplomas, Iowa Department of Education records show.

Elisabeth Buck, the chief community impact officer at United Way of Central Iowa, said high school diplomas are a basic requirement for most jobs. To keep up with local demand for workers, DMACC needs to graduate about 2,000 people from the HiSET program each year, she said. But only about 825 finish annually.

United Way will spend about \$1 million over the next five years as it works to increase the number of students completing the high school equivalency program.

“Because we’re now at such a high employment rate, we’re working with folks that have a large number of barriers. It’s not a one-and-done thing,” she said. “It takes a little more navigating and hand holding to help folks be successful.”

[Iowa’s bid to ‘ban the box’](#)

AMOS: Fixing the skills gap

In late 2007, community organizers started visiting black churches and holding house meetings about underemployment and unemployment in Des Moines' urban core.

Major employers complained they couldn’t find skilled workers and worried about future workforce shortages.

Yet organizers encountered countless workers, many of them black, who were struggling to find decent work, said Paul Turner, who was then the lead organizer of A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, or AMOS.

Many had enrolled in community college or other training programs, only to become discouraged and drop out, or had debt that kept them from returning. Some had criminal backgrounds. Some struggled with finding transportation.

“You go into the community, and you find all these people working their asses off,” Turner said. “But they’re not making a living wage because they don’t have the skills.”

AMOS sought to bridge the void between workers' skills and what employers need. Replicating a sister program in San Antonio, Texas, organizers started the job training program Project Iowa here in 2012.

Aside from teaching job skills, Project Iowa staff can act as a vetting source of sorts for employers. More than half the program’s graduates have criminal backgrounds.

“The skill gap is the easiest thing,” Turner said. “The harder thing is convincing the employer to take a chance on them and convincing the employee they can do it, that they’re worthy.”

Since its first class, Project Iowa has graduated 205 participants. About 40 percent of its graduates are black and alumni make on average about \$14 an hour.



Center for Working Families: Reaching youths in need

Marvin DeJear, director of the Evelyn K. Davis Center for Working Families, said nonprofits and government programs that work with youth have disappeared in recent decades.

The Evelyn K. Davis Center opened in 2012 to act as a clearinghouse of sorts for those seeking work. Aside from working on specific job searching skills, DeJear said, counselors spend much of their time working through personal issues such as child care and transportation.

He said central Iowa needs to invest in more youth programming and education. He pointed to the center's youth employment initiative, which builds work habits through paid internships for teens and young adults.

"You had youth programs that were working with 1,000 kids in the '70s," DeJear said, "to when I started here, none."

About 43 percent of the center's clients are black, DeJear said. But the problems facing low-earning or prospective workers aren't defined by race, he said.

"A lot of people are experiencing the same things nowadays. It's not so much a black and white thing anymore," he said. "It's about income disparity."



Limited by funding

It's a familiar lament — program directors say they could help more people, if only they had the funding.

Project Iowa Executive Director Julie Fugenschuh says she would like to increase capacity. But with an annual budget of about \$400,000, that's not possible.

Most funding comes from grants and private donations. Another \$100,000 comes from the state.

Most taxpayer dollars addressing employment gaps are funneled to higher education, reinforcing the narrative that everyone should go to college, she said.

Many of those who come to Project Iowa have racked up student loan debt, on average about \$15,000 apiece.

“Not everybody's meant to go to college straight out of high school,” Fugenschuh said.

Funding has also squeezed other jobs programs. United Way lost out on a \$1 million federal grant for its local high school equivalency program.

Central Iowa Works, which operates on a budget of about \$500,000, lost some \$10,000 this year in private funding, and it will train fewer than half the job seekers it trained last year.

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