



memworks

**BUSINESS CASE:
APTITUDE ALIGNMENT**

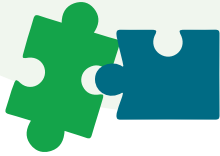
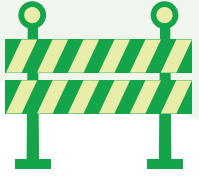
DECEMBER 2024

Funding for MemWorks was generously provided by:
AutoZone, Fleetwood Foundation, Hyde Family Foundation,
Power & Tel, and Sylvamo Corporation.

slingshot
Fighting Poverty.
Accelerating Impact.

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

APTITUDE ALIGNMENT



EMPLOYMENT ROADBLOCK

Insufficient supports are available to help people align their professional aptitudes with living-wage career pathways



MEMWORKS OVERVIEW

Employment pathways for Memphians living in poverty are not working. Memphians experience poverty at some of the highest rates in the nation. Finding a way out of generational poverty is difficult, and employment pathways fall short even when employers across the community face demand for workers. Until the community understands why these pathways are not working, leaders in the workforce ecosystem can never hope to implement solutions that will improve them.

MemWorks is a collaboration between MDRC, a national research and social policy institution,

and Slingshot Memphis, a local poverty-fighting center of influence that is helping enhance employment outcomes for people experiencing poverty in Memphis. By utilizing the combined strengths of Slingshot and MDRC, MemWorks is working to amplify, not duplicate, existing workforce initiatives and help unify the numerous disparate efforts across the city. MemWorks hopes to do this by establishing a common understanding of the workforce domain that will increase alignment and facilitate collaboration across multiple entities and endeavors.



ROADBLOCK INTRODUCTION

Insufficient supports are available to help people align their professional aptitudes with living-wage career pathways. Only [30 percent of industry credentials](#) earned by K-12 students in Tennessee are associated with jobs that pay \$15 per hour or more. In Memphis, misalignment exists between career and technical education in K-12, postsecondary programs, and the needs of local employers. Few resources are available to help students understand their inherent professional strengths, the professions that value these strengths, and the pathways to prepare for and enter these specific professions. As a result of these challenges, Memphians can cycle through many jobs in a trial-and-error method of career exploration without career progression, creating especially damaging

situations for Memphians experiencing poverty.

If students are able to reliably match their aptitudes, skills, and interests with available living-wage job opportunities, they would be empowered to pursue career pathways that not only leverage their unique strengths but also increase the probability of them being in a role where they can excel.

This business case proceeds with a discussion of the facts substantiating the roadblock, an introduction to the evidence-based interventions and case studies that are effective at overcoming it, and an analysis of existing efforts in Memphis seeking to address the roadblock. The business case concludes with a discussion of several opportunities to address this roadblock in Memphis.



ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW

Insufficient supports are available to help people align their professional aptitudes with living-wage career pathways. In Memphis, few resources exist to help people experiencing poverty identify their professional strengths and match those strengths with the living-wage jobs that value these strengths the most. As a result, tens of thousands of people are blindly pursuing employment pathways that do not value their unique talents and skill sets, greatly reducing the chance they will enjoy their work or find a role that allows them to excel.

Limited services are available to help expose students to career exploration and align interests and skills with career pathways before choosing certificate programs or postsecondary education. One graduate shared,

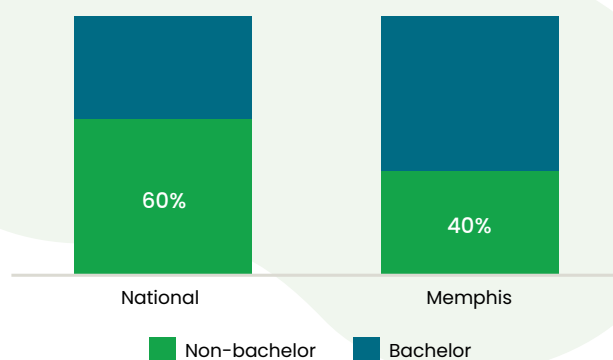
“[In school], no one ever really asked me what I was passionate about....I wore a lot of hats, but it always seemed like none of them was the perfect fit or there was no one that tried to help me tailor the hat.”

One Memphian described pursuing a CNA certification despite not being interested in the medical field because of pressure from family members. They shared, “My grandmother and my mother were both nurses and they’ve been trying to get me to be a nurse, but I don’t really believe in the medical field. And so I was like, ‘Okay. [Becoming a] CNA is gonna put a pause on them pressuring me into something I don’t wanna do.’” Had this person benefited from exposure to other career paths, they could have used this experience to inform their perspective and potentially chosen a career path better aligned with their interests and skill sets.

In addition, Memphis has fewer opportunities for students to pursue professional certifications and

credentials. Only [40 percent of the postsecondary programs](#) in Memphis are non-bachelor degree programs compared to the national average of 60 percent.

Availability of Non-Bachelor Postsecondary Programs



As a result of the challenges with identifying jobs that align with their skills and interests, Memphians experiencing poverty can cycle through many jobs in a trial-and-error method of career exploration without career progression. Frequently, people earn multiple unrelated certifications in an effort to find something that sticks. One student shared, “I went to college for two-and-a-half years. I left shortly after COVID got bad. Since then, I’ve been attending different [certificate] programs. I got my IT, my CNA, my aesthetics...”

Navigating a labor market without clear direction can result in young people in Memphis losing hope. Many Memphians expressed discontent with the city, generally, and shared a perception that Memphis lacks good jobs. Some shared the perception that new work opportunities stemming from industry growth tend to prioritize importing workers to Memphis instead of hiring Memphians for the best jobs. One Memphian shared,

ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW cont.

“This average Joe that’s from Memphis, you’re just quick to stick them in a warehouse.. . Where it actually matters for the city or for the company, [employers] don’t want to put a Memphian in that position.”

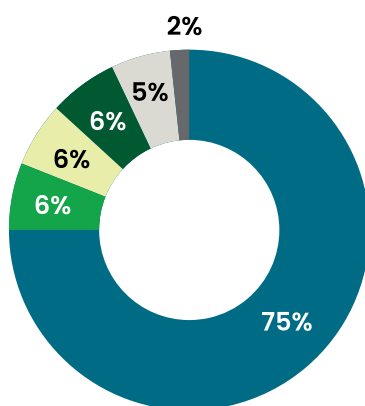
If students are able to reliably match their aptitudes, skills, and interests with available living-wage job opportunities, they would be empowered to pursue career pathways that are more likely to create economic mobility. Unfortunately, the majority of certifications offered and pursued by students in Memphis frequently do not lead to career advancement. Less than 15 percent of industry credentials earned by K-12 students in Memphis, as of March during the 2021-2022 academic year, contributed to helping a student be more competitive for a job. Across Tennessee, only [30 percent of industry credentials](#) earned by K-12 students were asked for by employers and are associated with jobs that pay \$15 per hour or more. A credential that does not contribute to an employment pathway offering a living wage can be a waste of students’ time and resources.



Industry credentials earned by Memphis K-12 students

As of March, 2021-2022 academic year

- OSHA 10
- CPR
- Microsoft Office Specialist
- Hair braiding
- Automotive Service Excellence
- Other



EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Summary of effective interventions

MemWorks uncovered several interventions that are effective at helping people make more informed decisions about future education and employment opportunities. These effective strategies can be broken into three primary categories:

- 1 Student Supports
- 2 Sector-based Practices
- 3 Technology Tools

1 STUDENT SUPPORTS

Alignment between students' professional aptitudes and the relevant living-wage careers that value these aptitudes is an important need for postsecondary programs. [Intensive recruitment and intake procedures](#) can help route students to the appropriate tracks from the beginning of their postsecondary experience by assessing students' knowledge, skills, aptitudes, educational and employment backgrounds, and career goals. Rigorous recruiting efforts can help programs improve inclusivity while ensuring students fully understand a program before they commit. While more students might be influenced to not participate in a program due to their aptitude misalignment, these practices likely result in better matching and higher rates of student persistence.

While these outcomes should be something all postsecondary organizations desire, unfortunately perverse incentives can lead to practices that can work against these outcomes. When funding models over-index on enrollment figures,

institutions can be incentivized to over-enroll students, regardless of their fit and likelihood to complete the program. While some data-driven over-enrollment might be needed to account for student attrition, proper alignment of incentives would support the adoption of intensive recruitment and intake procedures and, over time, even reduce the need for over-enrollment as students are better matched with programs.

Intentional follow-up with candidates who do not proceed into a program can help ensure they do not slip through the cracks and become disconnected from workforce supports. Typically these services are performed by 'success advocates' within organizations that implement this process. Success advocates are required to follow up with candidates who do not persist to provide referrals to other workforce supports. Informing candidates of other opportunities and providing personalized referrals to other workforce organizations can ensure every candidate benefits while also increasing the likelihood of reapplication once they are ready or qualified.

Once part of a postsecondary program, [Narrative Career Counseling](#) can help students process their career choice from the context of their lives and link it to personally relevant life themes. This form of career counseling focuses less on traits and abilities of the student and more on their understanding of themselves and their environment. Narrative Career Counseling focuses on subjectivity, context, and the agency to help students surface stressors and challenges in their lives that impact career choices. Some approaches within this model require trained counseling professionals to administer the support.

[Stackable Credentials](#) can help students align their skills and interests to their coursework and program selection. Stackable Credentials sequence certifications and credentialing in small

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

modules that can be accumulated over time to demonstrate a person's expanded competencies while they advance within a career pathway. Students are not required to fully commit to a program but instead can test their interest in a particular industry by pursuing an initial credential, allowing them to decide if the program is a good fit for them before they progress to the next stacked credential.

The [Guided Pathways Model](#) is typically employed by community colleges to help new students explore programs, consider possible careers, and develop complete academic plans. The model improves access to clearly designed programs of study aligned with students' interests and aspirations, helping students make more informed decisions about course selections. Advisors and counselors are provided with concrete guidelines and benchmarks to ensure students are on track. The model has been shown to improve the rate at which students earn college credits in their first year, reduce excess credits, and increase graduation rates. Another benefit is that students experiencing poverty were more successful at transferring credits from one program to another. To maximize the success of the Guided Pathways Model, it requires institution-wide changes inclusive of faculty and staff buy-in along with seamless coordination between multiple stakeholders.



The combination of these interventions can provide students greater clarity and alignment in their postsecondary program choices and career selections.

2 SECTOR-BASED PRACTICES

[Sectoral strategies](#) involve building integrated employment pathways into a critical business sector for a local community (e.g., healthcare, advanced manufacturing) by building partnerships across the workforce development ecosystem. This approach brings together business, education, economic development, workforce systems, and community organizations to provide all the training and support needed to help people navigate the path to a living-wage career within a sector. The approach also helps identify and collaboratively meet the workforce needs of that industry within a regional labor market. Sectoral strategies can organize investment in applicable skills training and increase access to the industry for people experiencing poverty. For the approach to impact this roadblock, the sectoral strategy will need to focus on aligning skill-building and upskilling opportunities with high-demand jobs, educating and supporting people to navigate the necessary steps to secure career opportunities within the industry, and increase awareness about sector labor market demand.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

[Navigator and liaison partnerships](#) create a dedicated position within community colleges and technical programs to manage industry relationships and build workforce development partnerships. This practice helps identify and even anticipate labor market and industry needs, which can be used to guide students and update curriculum. Strong navigator and liaison partnerships create sustainable pipelines for internships and full-time jobs for students and help industry partners navigate the ever-changing postsecondary landscape. Success for these partnerships depends on full leadership buy-in within the postsecondary institution and across industry leaders. With buy-in, postsecondary institutions can better employ student support strategies described above to help students understand the tracks available to them.



3 TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

There are several technology tools that try to help students identify their skills and aptitudes. The efficacy of most of these tools, however, has not been rigorously evaluated. Therefore, technology tools were not included as a validated practice. They are included in the case study section as emerging practices from which workforce development service providers can explore and learn more about.

Concluding thoughts

A combination of models is required to enable sufficient aptitude alignment for people to identify, prepare for, and secure employment that leads to economic mobility. These models need to be offered across the education continuum, beginning in the K-12th grades and continuing into postsecondary education and career & technical education opportunities.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

Case examples of successful approaches

The research identified several examples that provide powerful illustrations of the above models and can help inform how they might be successfully implemented in Memphis. Prior to any attempt to implement these models, they need to be adapted and refined for the local Memphis

context. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above that it employs, and the third column provides a brief description and commentary about its applicability for Memphis.







Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive recruitment and intake procedures • Sectoral strategies • Stackable credentials 	<p>Project QUEST is a nationally-replicated model that started in Texas to help young adults pursue entry-level positions in healthcare, manufacturing and IT. The organization provides a workforce program alongside wraparound supports as it aims to place students in careers within these target sectors. It presents an interesting parallel to the University of Memphis' recent efforts to award in-demand industry credentials. This synergy suggests that Project QUEST's comprehensive support and educational framework could potentially bolster Memphis' workforce development initiatives. However, differences in the industrial landscapes between San Antonio and Memphis may necessitate tailored approaches to meet unique local needs. Furthermore, the significant external funding that has propelled Project QUEST may not be as readily available in Memphis, posing challenges to replicating the model's success and scalability in a new context.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative Career Counseling • Navigator and liaison partnerships • Sectoral strategies • Stackable credentials 	<p>Purdue University's Center for Regional Development assists displaced workers, especially those without four-year degrees, by offering skills training, non-degree certificates, soft skills development, and job application support. This approach to skill-based hiring can significantly diversify the workforce, offering crucial opportunities to people from varied educational and socio-economic backgrounds, a move that aligns with Memphis' diverse population. However, transitioning to skill-based hiring in Memphis, especially in sectors traditionally focused on formal qualifications, may challenge entrenched practices and beliefs, requiring concerted efforts to effect change.</p>

Chart continued on next page.

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided Pathways Model • Intensive recruitment and intake procedures 	<p>The Guided Pathways Model, implemented by SUNY, offers a strategic approach to helping community college students achieve success by focusing on their future employment. This model aligns well with Memphis' UpSkill 901 initiative, enhancing workforce development through a structured educational path leading to pertinent certifications and degrees. However, the model's emphasis on clear program maps tailored to students' graduation and employment goals necessitates constant updates to align with Memphis' evolving industry needs, potentially demanding significant resources to maintain relevance and effectiveness.</p>
<p>Technology tools</p>   	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive recruitment and intake procedures • Technology tools 	<p>Xello, YouScience, and Naviance are web-based platforms serving US students from grades 6 to 12, assisting them in identifying their skills, competencies, and suitable career paths. These platforms can enhance youth economic mobility in Memphis through effective career planning and skill development. However, their success depends on a strong technological infrastructure, which may present challenges in Memphis.</p>

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE

The Memphis landscape analysis highlights five organizations that address aptitude alignment. While this list might not be comprehensive, it provides a valuable understanding of the current services available in Memphis seeking to address this roadblock. In some cases, the organization does not directly employ one of the interventions noted above, but it employs a similar model

that illustrates the purpose or function of the intervention. In cases where the model is not directly employed, *italics* are used to denote the distinction. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above it employs, and the third column describes the organizations' work as it relates to this roadblock.






Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Narrative Career Counseling</i> • <i>Sectoral strategies</i> 	<p>Agape's TeamWorks program offers holistic wraparound services for job seekers. Coaches put the needs of their clients first and focus on setting goals while addressing external barriers.</p> <p>Agape's Competitive Edge program builds relationships with employers and other community partners in Memphis to develop an understanding of industry needs and the Memphis labor market. Coaches share the insights from these efforts with their students to help them make informed decisions.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive recruitment and intake procedures • <i>Narrative Career Counseling</i> • <i>Sectoral strategies</i> 	<p>The Collective Blueprint requires interested candidates to submit an application and attend an acceptance day and an interview day with their team. The organization looks for applicants who demonstrate that they understand the commitment of the program and are not facing barriers so significant that would inhibit program completion. Once students begin the program, coaches help them navigate the program and industry. The coaches focus on helping students build skills that will enable them to secure the jobs that they desire and fit their skills.</p> <p>More generally, The Collective Blueprint maintains relationships with employers within specific industry sectors that enable them to provide accurate information to students and prepare them accordingly.</p>

Chart continued on next page.

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
 <p>The Collegiate School of Memphis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Guided Pathways Model</i> • <i>Narrative Career Counseling</i> 	<p>The Collegiate School of Memphis is a charter school in Shelby County that prepares students for postsecondary opportunities. While not a community college, its Foundations classes encourage students to explore careers and postsecondary opportunities. Students also develop life plans and academic plans that align to their skills and interests. The Foundations courses encourage self-reflection and push students to understand themselves as learners, workers, friends, leaders, and people.</p>
 <p>Economic Opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Intensive recruitment and intake procedures</i> • <i>Narrative Career Counseling</i> • <i>Sectoral strategies</i> 	<p>Economic Opportunities (EcOp) is dedicated to transforming the lives of adults who are under-resourced and justice impacted in Memphis by providing sustainable employment opportunities, life coaching, and mentoring through its innovative Shepherd’s Work program. EcOp begins with an application process that takes approximately two weeks and involves an application or referral form, pre-screening process, phone interview, in-person interview, and onboarding process. Participants meet with their mentor as a part of this process to begin filling out a Life Plan and begin setting their career goals.</p> <p>Participants are supported throughout the program with an on-site mentor and social worker who both help coach them through challenges they encounter in their job according to a life plan that enables them to set goals. EcOp also works with employers across Memphis who agree to offer open positions to EcOp’s participants, which provides them with a high likelihood of job placement.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Guided Pathways Model</i> • <i>Narrative Career Counseling</i> 	<p>The Soulsville Charter School provides a college readiness program that engages each student and their families to develop a postsecondary pathway that fits the student’s skills and interests. This is accomplished through individualized counseling and broader instruction and exposure to diverse postsecondary options. The Summer Growth Experience program allows students to try out different career opportunities, giving students control in selecting a wide range of summer opportunities to shadow and intern for companies with career paths of interest to students.</p>



THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

After reviewing the available services in Memphis seeking to support aptitude alignment, several potential gaps were identified. These gaps include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Outside of select programs, most K-12 education programs are not effectively identifying and aligning student aptitudes with available career opportunities
- Many postsecondary institutions lack intensive recruitment and intake procedures that help assess the goodness-of-fit between student and program
- Nonprofit organizations that focus on meeting basic needs are typically not equipped to help clients identify and align their skills and interests to select career opportunities



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Several opportunities for impact could improve the ability of job seekers to match their skills and interests to available career opportunities. The opportunities will help students at each step in their education consider how their aptitudes align with the jobs they are pursuing, which should

help reduce the number of unused degrees and the frequently circuitous path to a living-wage career path. These recommendations aim to empower stakeholders in Memphis' workforce ecosystem with specific, evidence-backed ways this roadblock can be effectively overcome.



OPPORTUNITY #1 **Improve aptitude assessment and career exposure in K-12 education**

While some schools like Collegiate and Soulsville excel at exposing students to career opportunities that align with their aptitudes, more work can be done across the ecosystem to adopt these practices as a standard, especially across Memphis Shelby County Schools (MSCS). Schools can also leverage technology tools and offer more personalized career coaching and counseling to ensure students are set up for success. More emphasis and capacity are needed in the K-12 ecosystem to fully implement this opportunity.

Many current high school counselors have the intention of providing this support for students, but they currently lack the time and capacity to invest in each student to make it possible. Ratios of counselors to students are high, and this limits the overall efficacy of counselor support. The integration of technology tools would be a welcome addition, but staff would need training on how to deploy these tools in a way that maximizes their impact. Resources need to be allocated to acquire the technology tools and to hire and train staff to provide aptitude alignment supports.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #2
**Improve aptitude assessment and
career exposure for adult job seekers
at nonprofit services**

Nonprofit human service organizations frequently sit on the front lines of workforce development and skills training. They encounter people seeking support for other basic needs, and employment assistance is often a focus of these wraparound support efforts. Nonprofits can adopt some of the same technology tools and approaches to help people identify and align their skills to career paths. Incorporating these tools and practices will help nonprofits improve their referrals to other organizations, yielding better outcomes for clients. There is currently a robust approach to aptitude alignment for nonprofits that support people with disabilities. There might be ways to learn from these existing programs and apply those successful models in a more general context. Funding is needed to support the adoption of technology tools and training for program staff.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #3 **Improve aptitude assessment and career exposure in technical training**

Established technical training programs can adopt more intensive and informative application and onboarding processes to help students match their aptitude to available career paths. This can help avoid false starts in technical training and ensure students entering the program are fully informed about the career path they are pursuing. Technology tools can integrate alongside Narrative Career Counseling and the Guided Pathways Model to bring these supports to life. At the outset, enrollments might initially dip as unqualified students are turned away from the program, but over time, persistence rates should increase and, in a well-functioning workforce ecosystem, the previously unqualified students can return after receiving other forms of remedial support. Funding for technology tools, staff training, and technical assistance is needed to launch or enhance these programs, but, over time, these modifications can pay for themselves and create efficiencies for training programs.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Improving aptitude assessment and career exposure across the workforce system will enable a larger proportion of the current and prospective workforce to enter professions where they can excel. People will better understand their unique professional strengths, the professions that value these strengths, and the pathways they need to follow to enter those professions. With this understanding, there should be a dramatic increase in the percent of industry credentials associated with living-wage careers that are earned by K-12 students in Memphis.

Enhancing aptitude alignment will also yield greater trust with career-seekers and create efficiencies for almost every institution involved. Intensive recruitment and intake procedures

might lead to an initial reduction in the number of enrolled technical training students, but after an initial adjustment period there would be a significant increase in the number of students who are successfully completing their programs and obtaining valuable industry credentials. Talent pools will better align with tangible employment opportunities, and students and workers will more clearly see possible advancement pathways to high-wage, high-demand careers. These efforts will directly benefit the approximately 60 percent of Memphians experiencing poverty who have a high school diploma but have not completed a postsecondary education or training program.

