



MDC

**Mobility, Career Pathways,
and the Landscape of
Employer and Youth
Engagement in the South**

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Introduction

It is harder in the American South than in any other part of the United States for a young person born in the bottom fifth of the income distribution to achieve significant upward mobility. The challenging confluence of the South’s economic history, its predominant attitudes toward investments in education and human capital development, and its legacy of long-tolerated racial and structural inequity make the climb up from the bottom of the economic ladder steeper, even in the region’s most economically robust communities. Changing the historic and deeply embedded attitudes, structures, and policies that constrain upward mobility for youth and young adults in the South will require action on a variety of fronts. But central to changing mobility dynamics and outcomes is the need to equip the region’s young people with the credentials, experience, and connections they need to gain entry to living-wage employment and position themselves for economic security—and the opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

This paper examines two important elements needed to prepare Southern youth and young adults to connect with rewarding employment opportunities: employer and youth engagement. It offers a framework to assess the preconditions for effective employer and youth engagement, identifies examples of promising efforts in a range of communities that represent the economic diversity present in the region, and considers what philanthropy can do to reinforce the need for attention to employer and youth engagement and proliferate and deepen practice in the South.

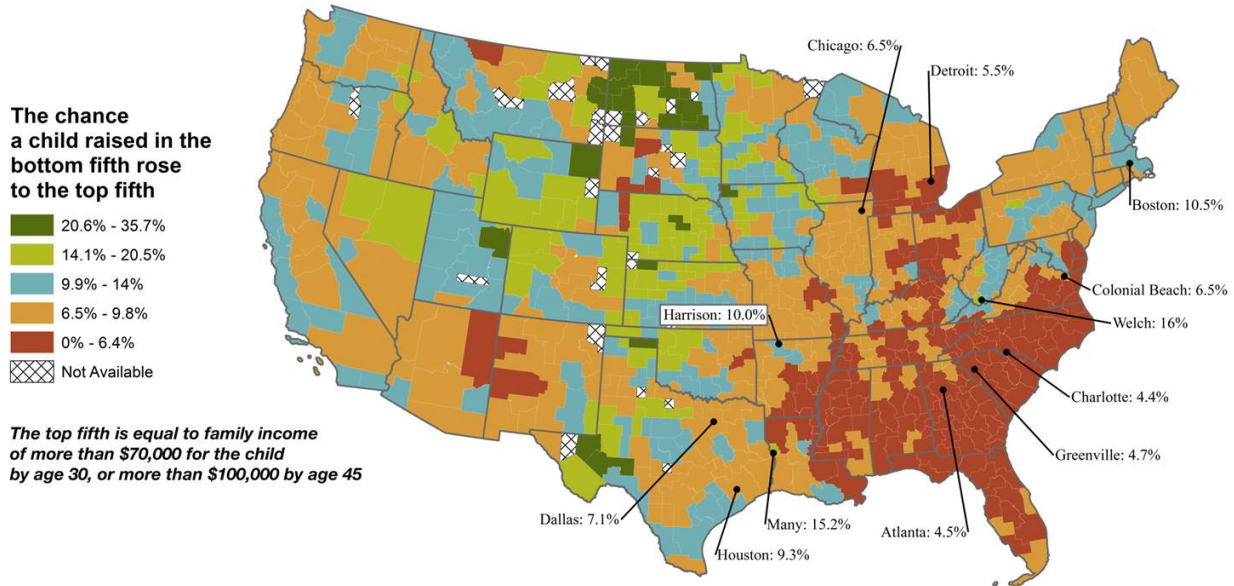
Improving the mobility of youth and young adults in the South means building a new roadbed on ground that has been saturated with inequality. It requires courageous conversations that acknowledge the flawed design of systems created in eras of racial prejudice, and leaders willing to look squarely at the structural inequities built into them. They then must redesign those systems to create an infrastructure of opportunity that serves both economic productivity and the unfinished business of equity. Real engagement means working truthfully with employers and the young people who will be their future workforce—the two groups for whom the system is supposed to work—in conjunction with the education and workforce systems that connect them. The goal is meaningful credentials for young people, jobs that pay a living wage, and economic growth that benefits businesses and communities. The case studies in this report illuminate communities that are struggling to address these issues, sometimes imperfectly, but struggling with them nonetheless. As James Baldwin wrote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

Why youth mobility matters in the South

In 2014, a team of scholars from Harvard and UC-Berkeley issued an arresting report on the [“Geography of Economic Mobility”](#) in the United States. Along with their provocative, longitudinal analysis of mobility prospects for young people came a stunning map spotlighting the spatial distribution of mobility prospects for youth born to families in the bottom fifth of the income distribution. It showed that the South, traditionally the region of the nation most scarred by income and asset poverty, was also the nation’s laggard in

rates of upward economic mobility. The map was a wake-up call to the South, which had for 20 prior years been an engine of population and job growth for the nation.

Lack of mobility: The South stands out



Not only was upward mobility deeply constrained in traditional high-poverty areas of the region, such as the Mississippi Delta and the Black Belt, but economically dynamic cities such as Charlotte and Atlanta lagged their peer metropolitan areas in the opportunity for economic advancement for young people born poor. Spurred by this analysis, MDC focused its 2014 edition of [State of the South](#) on an exploration of the “infrastructure of opportunity” — the pathways and supports the South needs to connect its youth and young people to meaningful postsecondary credentials and, consequently, living-wage employment. Only by constructing such an infrastructure of opportunity capable of supporting strong and pervasive education-to-career pathways in labor markets across the region could the South hope to make the American Dream achievable for economically stalled, low-mobility youth.

The *State of the South* further argued that the region’s long-term economic competitiveness would be constrained as long as an emerging generation of Southern workers—today’s youth and young adults—were ill-equipped, poorly prepared, and only tangentially connected to living-wage growth sectors in the Southern economy. Given policy gridlock in Washington and many Southern capitals, building the infrastructure of opportunity necessary to support vigorous education-to-career opportunities, career pathways, and work-based learning in the South would require a new level of regional partnership among major employers, leaders of education and public workforce systems, youth-serving community organizations, government, and philanthropy. Fortuitously, *State of the South* found that communities in the region were starting to organize themselves to address structural inadequacies in their education-to-career infrastructure, and some were intentionally focusing their efforts to address stalled mobility for their least advantaged youth and young adults. But these efforts, however hopeful, were still mostly isolated, fragile, and young.

The roots of the problem

The economic mobility challenge facing youth and young adults in the South reflects the region’s economic history, attitudes toward education and human capital investment, and disturbing tolerance of structural inequities. ***Changing mobility patterns will involve equal proportions of smart design and deep cultural change.***

For most of the twentieth century, the South managed to turn its historic economic liabilities into economic selling points: deep ranks of poor and poorly educated whites and blacks—a regional fixture since Reconstruction—became the foundation of a low-wage workforce, able to support an economy primarily based on production agriculture and low-skill manufacturing. The promise of a low-tax environment attracted branch plants fleeing high-cost communities in the North and Midwest, but low taxes resulted in thin revenues for investment in education and infrastructure. The accompanying right-to-work ideology further suppressed labor advocacy and contributed to stunted wage-growth. The results were a self-reinforcing economic culture, where the principal avenues of generational uplift and mobility—opportunities for postsecondary attainment and family-sustaining employment—were not widely available, especially for the poor and racial minorities. In the last quarter of the last century, progressive “New South” leaders began to push on the old orthodoxy by increasing investments in education. Civil rights advances began to take hold. Newcomers and reverse migrants flooded the South.

What are the chances a child raised in the bottom income quintile will rise to the top quintile as an adult?

Commuting Zone	Chance of Rising From Lowest Fifth to Top Fifth	Rank out of 729 Zones (#1 is worst)
Mobile, AL	5.1%	93
Raleigh, NC (includes Durham)	5.0%	85
Greenville, SC	4.7%	65
Tupelo, MS	4.4%	52
Brownsville, TX	9.2%	379
Houston, TX	9.3%	387

- The best mobility in large US commuting zones? In San Jose, CA, a young person has a 12.9 percent chance of rising from the lowest to the highest quintile.
- The worst mobility in large US commuting zones? In Memphis, TN, a young person has a 2.8 percent chance of rising from the lowest to the highest quintile.

By the end of the century, the South led the nation in job and population growth, driven by the dynamism of Atlanta, Charlotte, the North Carolina Research Triangle, and city-states in Florida and Texas. Yet the 2011 *State of the South* report showed that much of that progress had eroded in the wake of the Great Recession and profound ideological

shifts in political leadership. Five years after the onset of the recession, well into the recovery, underemployment rates for workers under age 25 exceeded the U.S. average in six Southern states: Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas (each above 30%) and South Carolina. Simultaneously, K-12 spending per student eroded in every Southern state except Tennessee between FY 2008 and 2014, with the rate of decline in Alabama leading the nation. Higher education spending per capita fell everywhere but North Carolina and Texas, and by severe rates in Kentucky (-8.1%), Alabama (-8.9), and Louisiana (-34.4). In short, two of the principal pillars of upward mobility for young people—education, as measured by per capita expenditure, and employment—have significantly eroded in the last seven years. At the same time, the South’s population of youth and young adults is increasingly composed of youth of color who have historically faced disproportionate obstacles in connecting to postsecondary credentials and living-wage work.

The slow transformation of the South from a low-wage, low-cost, low-skill region to a high-value, living wage region—a transformation that seemed to be beginning, at least in pockets, 20 years ago—now seems much more challenging. Yet the realities of stalled mobility and demographic change make that transformation even more urgently necessary.

A practical starting point

Building powerful and effective education-to-career pathways to connect youth to living-wage employment

Having analyzed these conditions and worked extensively with leaders and communities across the South, MDC now operates from the conviction that the construction of strong education-to-career pathways—deliberately designed to produce talent development pipelines that connect Southern youth and young adults to living-wage employment—can be a practical and powerful way to seed new mobility opportunities and alter, through practice, the inherited culture and practices that keep young people stuck in place.

Our flagship demonstration project, [Made in Durham](#), is focused on forging a partnership of key private-sector, education, government, and civic leaders who will pioneer the building of education-to-career pathways characterized by rich, work-based learning. Its goal is to equip Durham youth with the credentials and experience required to gain entry-level, living wage employment in the sectors that are driving the local economy. That economy exemplifies a subset of high-growth, high-opportunity Southern communities, where the best jobs have historically been captured by highly credentialed in-migrants, leaving a large proportion of local youth as economic bystanders in a world of opportunity. Economic disconnection has a strong racial dimension, and uneven performance by local education and workforce systems perpetuates disconnection by inadequate preparation of too many local youth for high-wage occupations. Made in Durham seeks to build a new talent development pipeline that will address these historic deficiencies. Central to its work is a deliberate strategy to build an education-to-career system in Durham that will satisfy the needs of two customers: employers and young people. Accordingly, Made in Durham is engaging major employers as strategists, advocates, funders, and lead participants in creating career pathways and work-based learning opportunities while simultaneously investing deeply in youth engagement to give young people, especially those poorly served by existing systems, a strong voice in strategy setting and design. A customer-driven ethos—those customers being both the employers, who hold jobs, and the young people who aspire to fill them—drives bilateral engagement.

The Tupelo region of Northeast Mississippi illustrates a variation on the theme of education-to-career pathways, but tailored to different economic circumstances and opportunities. Here, the presence of a major Toyota automobile manufacturing facility is reshaping the regional economy through an influx of direct production jobs at Toyota and the relocation of suppliers to support the plant. Long dependent on furniture and textile manufacturing, this micropolitan region halfway between Memphis and Birmingham had begun to diversify its economy with healthcare and financial services jobs when the 2007 arrival of Toyota dramatically altered the requirements of the region's talent development pipeline. Unlike Durham, a mid-sized city centered in the Research Triangle of North Carolina, the Tupelo region was unlikely to become a magnet for significant in-migration. To satisfy the current and emerging workforce needs of Toyota and its partners, and to ensure that the benefits of new economic activity accrued to local people, Northeast

Mississippi would need a reengineered talent development system capable of preparing local youth and young adults for work in advanced manufacturing and related fields. A 10-year, \$50 million charitable commitment from Toyota to the regional community foundation is now spurring the creation of career guidance and preparation, dual enrollment, work-based learning, and other strategies to raise postsecondary entry and completion and prepare young people for the high-wage employment the region is now attracting. Efforts are now underway, assisted by MDC, to create a leadership team of major employers and education system heads to guide the strategic deployment of the Toyota Wellspring Educational Endowment Fund in ways that can ensure that youth and young adults from historically marginalized backgrounds are fully exposed to, and prepared for, the new living-wage opportunities coming to the region. A full and complementary strategy for youth engagement is still evolving.

Assuming that education-to-career strategies are an essential element of an infrastructure of opportunity capable of changing the South's stubborn mobility patterns, and assuming that strong youth engagement is requisite for creating education-to-career systems that are effective, relevant, and accountable, what needs to be in place so that isolated examples can thrive and proliferate? What are the preconditions for building and expanding on the promising efforts to build an infrastructure of opportunity that are now emerging in some parts of the region?

Preconditions for what the South needs

MDC sees four preconditions, or enabling elements, needed for strong, accountable education-to-career efforts to take hold and make progress on prevailing mobility patterns and inequitable outcomes for Southern youth. Conditions for successfully building avenues for youth and young adult economic advancement are determined by the degree to which all four are present.

1. A vigorous economy producing living-wage jobs in meaningful numbers

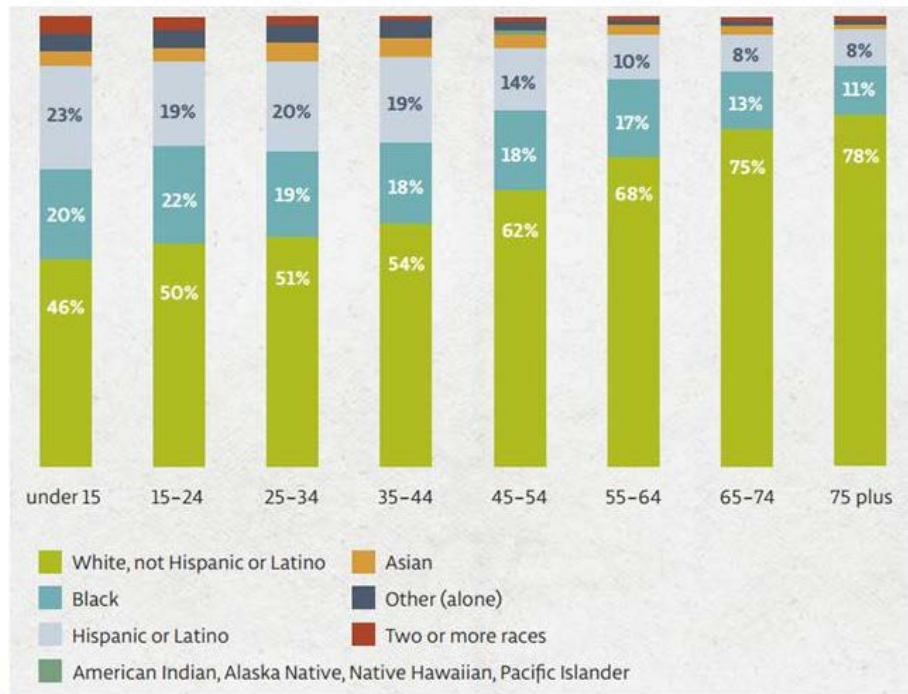
A strong economy that produces living-wage jobs in meaningful numbers galvanizes awareness and spurs a sense of urgency about improving inadequate and underperforming talent development patterns. Of the places MDC explores in this paper, Durham, Greenville, S.C., Houston, Mobile, and Tupelo all are experiencing high-wage job growth that the local talent development infrastructure cannot satisfy. The same is true of other Southern communities and regions that are placing new emphasis on education to career strategies such as Nashville, Louisville, and Jacksonville, FL. Where growth in living wage employment is slack or non-existent—as it is in many rural areas and stagnant metropolitan regions—the impetus to challenge the South's predominant culture of low-investment is dulled, posing a significant challenge to efforts to build and sustain a talent development system characterized by strong education-to-career pathways. In those places, the arguments for creating an infrastructure of opportunity become more theoretical and less pragmatic.

2. Engaged, top-level private sector leadership

Employers create jobs. Their deep involvement in setting strategy, mobilizing civic and political will, raising resources, realigning their workplaces to provide enabling environments

where effective work-based learning can take hold, and advocating practice and policy change in public workforce and education systems undergirds and accelerates change. In many Southern communities, however, economic leaders reinforce the cultural and economic status quo rather than serving as catalysts for reform. In the communities reviewed here, economic leadership departs in significant ways from the historic norm: in Tupelo, the arrival of a major international firm with a deep commitment to talent development brought executive-level engagement for significant financial backing for deep education-to-career reform; in Durham, a health-care innovator—the CEO of the region’s largest employer, Duke University Health System—recruited change-oriented peers to populate the board of Made in Durham; in Greenville, BMW, Michelin and other European employers have shaped a new culture of strategic attention to talent development along with a deep pool of high-paying jobs. Similar dynamics are present in Mobile, where Airbus and ThyssenKrupp are now raising expectations for the performance of that region’s education-to-career system. These communities are becoming harbingers of new possibilities in the way economic leadership deploys itself to challenge the South’s traditions of low human capital investment.

Southern age groups by race and ethnicity, 2012



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2012

3. An underlying equity framework

In order for education-to-career efforts to be an effective tool in addressing stalled upward mobility for youth and young adults, they need to be grounded in an equity analysis that is data-driven and informed by history. An understanding of history is required to inform strategy because the South’s standard approaches to talent development for youth and young adults have, either deliberately or unconsciously, usually fallen short of preparing economically disadvantaged and youth of color to capture their full share of rewarding employment. The consequences of a low-skill, low-

wage economic model have fallen hardest on marginalized communities. The changing Southern demography provides a powerful opportunity for redress. The current and emerging Southern workforce is increasingly composed of young people of color. Preparing them successfully for high-skill, living-wage occupations is essential for making the South competitive in a global economy. For the first time in the South's history, economic competitiveness compels attention to equity. The analysis and logic guiding education-to-career reforms in Durham, Houston, and Tupelo deliberately reflect this reality and are essential for building systems that are universal and not selective in defining the youth they seek to advance. As Made in Durham's action plan states, Durham's education-to-career pathways must work as well "for the most disconnected youth as for the most advantaged." While still the exception rather than the norm, this thinking needs to permeate the South.

4. Backbone capacity to guide planning and implementation

Changing culture and practice to build the equity-oriented talent development systems the South needs requires deep organizational capacity at the community level. In the absence of dedicated organizations that can frame and communicate a compelling equity imperative for career pathways, organize high-level, cross-sectoral leadership, mobilize youth engagement, seed work-based learning, and build dual-customer talent development systems, most Southern communities stay stalled in the status quo. Culture and history are powerful contributing factors to the capacity deficit: Southern communities have never built what they didn't require. The absence of philanthropic venture capital to seed catalytic institutional capacity is another constraint on innovation in the South. Philanthropy that supports extra-governmental youth employment intermediaries and backbone organizations in major cities in the North, Midwest, and Far West is largely unknown in the South, and when investment enters the region from the outside, it generally concentrates in the same popular communities. In the examples illuminated in this brief, communities have built or improvised the backbone organizational capacity they need: the Greater Houston Partnership is a preexisting, business-led nonprofit with strong connections to the region's economic leadership; CREATE, the community foundation of the Tupelo region, is an esteemed and established strategic grantmaker; Made in Durham is a purpose-built nonprofit with high-level, cross-sector governance; Greenville Works is sponsored by the area United Way, which has embraced collective-impact grantmaking; the Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council is a rare Southern example of an innovative, high-performing, public-sector workforce organization. To spread and deepen effective education-to-career practices, the South will need to move beyond rare pockets of invention and innovation to a more pervasive infrastructure of support.

Employer and youth engagement

Employers

The communities in this paper represent a small but geographically diverse sample of the shifting role of employers in shaping their future workforce. Increasingly, they are becoming strategic leaders, drivers of education and training reform, actively engaged in the design, delivery, and performance appraisal of efforts to align supply and demand within the local economy.

As our examples illustrate, the impetus for action can be sparked by the demands of a hot economy (Houston) or new sector (Brownsville's aeronautic cluster). In Durham and Tupelo, business interests lie in raising local skills and ensuring their recruitment pool reflects their customer base; in Greenville, the European corporate traditions of workforce investment are strong within its leading companies, Michelin, BMW, and Bosch. Importantly, in all sites, while corporate social responsibility may motivate some employers, the principal driver (and far more reliable motivator) is their business interest in ensuring a steady source of talent that meets specific skill standards.

The form that sponsoring organizations take is equally varied. In Houston, the longstanding Greater Houston Partnership has initiated *Upskill Houston* to prepare local residents for high growth sectors of health and petrochemicals. In Brownsville it is the economic development agency, in Mobile it's the Workforce Development Board and the Chamber, and in Tupelo it is a community foundation and a single employer, Toyota.

In almost every community, the pattern appears to be shifting from single-company, customized training to group involvement in career pathways by employers within a sector or industrial cluster. As with Made in Durham, Houston, and Greenville, many of these pathways begin with career and technical education and experiential learning in middle schools, provide progressively skilled work-based training in postsecondary education and training, and continued support once on the job.

To respond to business needs, in different places and at different stages of development, the supply system is making new efforts on a number of fronts:

- engaging employers in every aspect of pathway development: sector selection, course and curricula design, cross-institution alignment, oversight and evaluation, career advancement
- working with state labor market information systems to improve local intelligence, ensuring career paths meet workplace skill standards for high growth occupations
- collaborating to provide a single point of contact (an account manager) who understands business needs and makes it easy for companies to engage
- focusing on sustained relationships that touch the whole business—not simply one-off transactions with HR
- developing customer relationship management (CRM) systems to track employer activity and customer feedback

- using employer organizations (Chambers, trade associations, etc.) as communication channels to reach smaller businesses and mobilize support for career pathways.

With the exception of Houston, which has an impressive history of business leadership in economic development and K-12 and postsecondary education reform, much of this work represents a brave new departure for organizations that have had little experience in building strategic and systematic employer engagement, at any scale. To succeed, it is likely to require a major organizational and financial investment. Most will need to recruit expert staff who have deep knowledge of a sector and a relentless focus on customer service. Many will need to shift from a supply-driven to a demand-led approach, where design starts with the employer and works backwards to the institution and individual. And for many it will mean a serious reappraisal of products and services to guarantee that they add real value to a business.

These changes will take time and may be painful for some organizations. However, the better they meet employer needs, the more they will enable young people to succeed in rewarding work and adulthood. So, the issue for communities throughout the South is not whether to adopt this new approach. Rather, it is how to speed the knowledge development process for both employers and educators, and for the intermediaries that connect them.

Youth

Empowering young people to inform and meaningfully shape education to career efforts can create powerful, locally specific strategies for building an infrastructure of opportunity. At minimum, youth—particularly those intended to be served—can offer critical, experientially based perspectives on systemic barriers that inhibit mobility in a certain area. Communities can and do engage youth beyond the level of advisors, however, increasing local buy-in and sharpening the skills and confidence of future leaders. Both Durham and Brownsville have created systems in which young people are fully integrated as partners, sharing in decision-making with more tenured leaders and, in the case of Brownsville, becoming elevated to critical leadership positions within the community.

In developing and implementing these robust youth engagement strategies, adult leaders in Durham and Brownsville benefited from several common practices:

- allowing youth to define and refine their own roles, either at the outset or as work unfolds. *In Durham, the Youth Network was designed by a recent college graduate.*
- respecting the lived experience of young people as highly instructive to the type of opportunity infrastructure created in a particular area.
- supporting young leaders in developing critical skills for community capacity building. *In Brownsville, adult leaders with experience in evaluation helped youth develop and refine a pre- and post-survey to measure impact of a college access and success program.*
- building the abilities of youth to mentor and train other youth as leaders. *In Brownsville, student leaders are responsible for training all incoming collegiate “Student Ambassadors” before they work with K-12 students.*

- where possible, compensating youth for time spent on project planning and implementation.
- connecting to existing organizations and community infrastructure that have built trusted relationships with young people. *In Durham, the initial cohort of Youth Network members was culled from a list of nominations from community-based organizations across the city.*

Putting these practices into place requires technical skills that are passed on by adult community leaders, such as the ability to teach young people how to evaluate programs and the skills to successfully network and partner with leaders of youth-focused, community-based organizations. Perhaps even more than technical skills, however, successful youth engagement requires an ethos of respect and dedication to “working with” not “doing for” young people, particularly those that have not benefited from systems as currently designed. The root of successful youth engagement may be at its core an art — the ability of community leaders, particularly those who do not share the same socioeconomic, racial or cultural backgrounds as the youth in question, to really, deeply think about how requests for engagement may land with disenfranchised young people and customize them accordingly. It means being as clear as possible at the outset about how youth will be engaged, why they are being engaged, what will come of their engagement, and if they have any power to suggest other methods. It means paying attention to where youth are engaged — will meetings be held in the neighborhoods where they live or in another area? What will be directly and indirectly communicated to youth about who holds power as you seek their assistance and partnership? What are youth being asked to give and what are they receiving in return? Are there options for them to become leaders in the work?

Young people are in tune to the degree to which they are being asked to be partners as opposed to mere informants of work, and even more, to the degree to which they are respected in whatever role they are asked to play. Clarity, flexibility, and a willingness to listen to them openly and with respect are some of the best practices evident in the Durham and Brownsville education-to-employment efforts today.

Diverse communities, promising efforts

Following are snapshots of representative places in the South, where promising efforts in employer engagement and youth engagement are underway. They point to what is possible in a region that requires far more to spur youth mobility and economic connection.

Durham, North Carolina

The Place

Over the past two decades, Durham has moved from a low-skilled, tobacco-reliant community to become the “City of Medicine” and a Southern center of culture and creativity. Its dynamic, knowledge-based economy is a magnet for the health, pharmaceutical, biotechnology and IT industries. Its Research Triangle Park is rich in employers and in the middle-skill jobs that pay living wages for new recruits, boasting an employment rate projected to outstrip the state and the U.S. by 2021.

Yet, despite this thriving market, too few youth and young adults who grow up in Durham are getting these good jobs, and too few have the academic and workplace skills to compete with more qualified candidates from other cities and states. Many struggle to find their way through a fragmented collection of institutions and organizations that are working to support young people but not always working together. Much of this reflects Durham’s history as a tobacco and textile manufacturing center, where employment was not conditioned on education or credentialing, along with a legacy of race-based inequity in educational investment and expectations. Most of the victims of Durham’s current opportunity gap are young men and women of color. The situation belies Durham’s recent designation as the nation’s most tolerant city.

Leadership

In 2012, the Made in Durham Task Force was established to examine what it would take to ensure that young people succeed in the labor market and that employers benefit from more home-grown talent. After 18 months of research and planning, the group incorporated as a nonprofit organization. Its mission is to inform, align and support the development of an education-to-career system that will increase the number and proportion of Durham’s youth who attain a postsecondary credential and living wage employment by age 25.

The Made in Durham board is composed of top business, public sector and community leaders— individuals who have the economic, political, and personal clout to drive institutional change and influence the behavior of their peers. It is distinctive in that it is employer-led, and every member— private, public and nonprofit—is a CEO or the highest ranking member of their organization, able to make decisions and commit resources. Its chair, now president of the Institute of Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, was chancellor of Duke University Health System, the second largest private employer in the state, providing rich employment opportunities across the skills continuum. He was attracted to join the effort not only because of the hospital’s role as a major employer, but

also because of the growing recognition in the public health field of “the social determinants of health”— the concept that weak health and social outcomes are directly related to levels of economic inequality present in a society. Addressing youth employment by connecting young people to living-wage jobs offered Durham a lever to narrow income inequality and raise health outcomes.

As the linchpin of a comprehensive education-to-career system, the board’s primary objective is to guide the development of strong career pathways, fostering alignment between the talent development system (education and workforce) and major employers in growth sectors of the economy. Supported by a small staff, the board provides strategic direction, increased accountability and advocacy for resource allocation, innovation and systems change.

Equity Framework

While Made in Durham is designed as a universal system—one that serves all youth and young adults—the basic yardstick of the system’s value is that it works as well for the most disconnected youth as it does for the most privileged. Durham is very far from that position today. Forty percent of Durham’s youth and young adults are not on track to complete high school, achieve a postsecondary credential of some kind, and gain employment by the time they are 25 years old. This includes between 4,500 and 6,000 disconnected youth—enough to fill four Durham high schools—who are either at significant risk of dropping out of school or who are not pursuing any education, training or employment.

Within the past several years, the rising numbers of young people, particularly Latino and African-American youth—who live in poverty and racial segregation—are disengaged from education or already are in the “pipeline to prison”, has become a major issue for Durham politicians and educators. This concern, however, has yet to be translated into the financial investment in schools and nonprofit organizations that is needed to plug gaps or enrich services for young people who are behind or off track. The need is particularly acute for alternative education and employment services for disengaged and disaffected older youth.

The Backbone Organization

The Made in Durham staff serves as a backbone organization and convener for the partners that include the public education and training institutions, selected nonprofit organizations, and employers. In addition to the Made in Durham board, the staff supports a Strategy Team composed of senior executives from each of the partners. Their work is focused on the design and development of the infrastructure that underpins a career pathways system: performance measures, data analysis and tracking, fiscal mapping, employer engagement, youth engagement, knowledge development, and fundraising.

Employer Engagement

From the outset, Made in Durham’s strategy has been to position employers as advocates for an education-to-career system. In the near term, their task is to help frontline education and workforce institutions—Durham Public Schools, Durham

Technical Community College, North Carolina Central University¹ and the Workforce Development Board—construct career pathways that lead to postsecondary credentials and good jobs. In the longer term, it is to help shift the culture so that employers see youth investment as a part of doing business in the Research Triangle. To draw on the full range of business expertise and resource, employers are involved in four roles: strategic leaders setting the vision and driving systemic change; co-designers of the career pathway system; talent builders, providing quality work-based learning opportunities for students and disconnected youth; critical friends giving feedback on how well the emerging system is meeting business needs.

The first pathway, in health and life sciences, will serve as a prototype for subsequent ones. So far, Made in Durham has focused on recruiting large employers that can provide work-based learning and jobs, and can influence the activity of their suppliers and other companies in the field. While still at an early stage, the board's leadership in employer engagement has opened doors and convinced some businesses to change HR policies related to providing opportunities for high school students. The number of summer job opportunities has tripled over previous years and laid the foundation for year-round relationships. Work is now underway with partners to design a collaborative approach to four important functions: improved labor market information, marketing and communications, sector-based account management, and an employer tracking (CRM) system.

Youth Engagement

Made in Durham has two customers: local employers and the young people (14-24-years-old) who live there. Over the past year, a youth network has been carefully recruited to reflect the diversity of this population, including those in high school and college and those who have dropped out of education. The purpose of the network is to ensure youth participate meaningfully in the design, implementation, and evaluation of Made in Durham initiatives. Two representatives of the network are now voting members of Made in Durham's board, and the group is planning an extensive research and development program that will produce a report and action project during the next year.

Strengths and Challenges

It is still very early for Made in Durham. Much progress has been made but, like an onion to be peeled, the full scale and complexity of the challenge continue to emerge. The issues require long-term vision, focus, and determination, not simply more money or more programs. There is a constant tension between maintaining a clear lens on systemic change (with an understanding of how long that change takes) and producing the early wins that lend confidence in and support of the work.

Made in Durham's governance and management is now firmly in place with a small staff supporting the board and a partners' Strategy Team. The health and life science pathway is underway: aligning courses and curricula across institutions for the first time; opening work-based learning for students with participating employers; and connecting an "on-ramp" from nonprofit organizations to the community college.

¹ North Carolina Central University is an HBCU and local branch of the UNC system.

Three lessons are already clear. First, the prominence of employers in Made in Durham has been its singular added value in an over-crowded education and training field. CEOs on the board have influenced politicians, raised funds, and brought business acumen to strategy and execution. Importantly, they also have leveraged contacts with peers, suppliers, and employer organizations to offer work-based learning, mentors, technical advice, and trainers to support the work of Made in Durham partners.

Second, it has been easier to develop work-based learning opportunities with employers than it has been to find young people who can succeed in them—who have the essential soft skills to manage a rewarding internship, along with access to transportation, child care, and supporting adult guidance. Much work needs to be done in the high school and alternative settings to blend learning and work, to better prepare youth for these opportunities, and to provide the personal adult guidance for them to flourish once there.

Third, Durham is characterized by an enormous network of public and nonprofit organizations committed to youth. While many are doing good work, overall the network is not good enough. It is fragmented and fragile, with too many organizations trying to provide full services rather than specializing in what they do best. The result is that Durham has large gaps in high quality services, particularly for disconnected youth. A clearer commitment by all funders to improved quality, rationalizing services, and filling critical program needs should be an important priority in the next three years.

Tupelo, Mississippi

The Place

The Tupelo region has a rare complement of assets for the rural South. Despite being in a poor state, its economy is growing and diversified, generating a healthy array of living-wage jobs in transportation and equipment manufacturing, advanced materials, and life sciences to enrich the traditional base in textile and wood products in the three counties surrounding the city. At 16 percent, the Tupelo region's rate of job growth is expected to outpace both Mississippi (8.8%) and the nation (11.8 percent) by 2023. Meanwhile, the demographics of Tupelo's youth population are diverging sharply from that of older adults: non-white youth and young adults comprise 33 percent of the 15-24 age group, compared to 22 percent of people 55-64. Given that key educational attainment data also diverge sharply by race—30 percent of whites have college degrees in the region compared to 15 percent of African Americans and 13 percent of Latinos—the region has work to do to create a well-credentialed workforce that from its current cadre of new and potential workers.

Two important civic institutions—the [Community Development Foundation](#), the regional equivalent of a chamber of commerce, and [CREATE](#), a regional community foundation, are committed to setting a regional agenda to address poverty and underdevelopment and to engaging and supporting leaders to implement it. The Toyota Wellspring Education Fund (TWEF), a \$50 million donor-advised fund established at CREATE by the region's dominant manufacturing operation, is a potentially game-changing philanthropic initiative that could seed essential education to career infrastructure and supports.

Leadership

CREATE is in the process recruiting a cadre of top-level business, education, and civic leaders who will shape a long-term program strategy for TWEF and advocate changes in policy, practice, and funding priorities to strengthen career guidance, education, and exposure throughout the region. CREATE and TWEF have the potential to be a regional center of gravity for the system and for culture change work necessary for Northeast Mississippi to change expectations and education-to-work outcomes for youth.

Equity Framework

Planning for strategic implementation for the TWEF has created a new opportunity to elevate and address equity gaps in education-to-career success patterns for youth. Already research for TWEF has identified serious gaps in performance and achievement along the continuum from school to postsecondary entry and completion to careers, gaps that track race, family income, and geography. Work remains for CREATE and TWEF to make the analysis a springboard for dialogue and action among civic and system leaders in the region and to deal with attitudes and practices – such as high rates of out-of-school suspension -- that continue to ration and derail youth opportunities.

The Backbone Organization

CREATE and the Community Development Foundation (CDF) have high levels of reputational and financial capital to make the case for strong and sustainable education-to-career pathways for youth and young adults and to seed their creation. For over 65 years the CDF has rallied leaders to champion the region's economic transformation from agriculture to basic and, now, advanced manufacturing. With 1,200 members, CDF exhibits rare reach and capacity for a development institution in a micropolitan region. With assets of over \$85 million and affiliate funds in 12 counties surrounding the city of Tupelo, CREATE has equal presence and heft on the philanthropic side. These organizations must still build the technical and process acumen needed to help schools, postsecondary institutions, and employers align their talent development efforts to serve the region's growth and undo its persistent patterns of inequity.

Employer Engagement

The TWEF is currently recruiting senior leaders from major employers to guide its program strategy and advocate necessary systems change and public investment for implementation. In addition to TWEF, CREATE and the Community Development Foundation regularly engage employer leadership in their continuous improvement efforts to strengthen the region's economy and quality of life. This is a strong base from which to build employer-led education-to career pathways.

Youth Engagement

The Tupelo region's capacity and experience with deep youth engagement is not as strong as its significant ability to engage employers. However, churches and traditional youth-serving organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs and Big Brothers/Big Sisters could become effective nodes for a regional youth-engagement network, allowing the

Tupelo region to leverage the community-level infrastructure they have—and that youth trust—to for a new purpose.

Strengths and Challenges

Tupelo is a rarity in the South: a micropolitan region in a poor state with a vigorous economy, a growing concentration of living-wage jobs, deep philanthropic resources focused on building pathways to postsecondary credentials and rewarding employment for area youth, and an anchor institution capable of marshalling regional leadership to support program innovation and infrastructure investment in a multi-county region. Through its \$50 million Toyota Wellspring Education Fund (TWEF), the CREATE Foundation has commissioned data on education-to-career success patterns and occupational and living-wage employment trends, and conducted focus groups and interviews with young people, and educators from the public schools and community college. CREATE now enables over 2,000 students to attend the four community colleges in northeast Mississippi tuition-free, and is poised to deploy TWEF resources to strengthen career guidance across the region through a major Career Expo for youth modeled on a successful prototype in Mobile.

While the reform efforts spurred by CREATE are being welcomed in the region, their rollout is also showing that traditional attitudes about which youth are capable of postsecondary success and worthy of deep investment and support are stubbornly in place, often among leaders in the education sector. Whether the region has the capacity and will to address cultural barriers to youth and young success is an open question. The Tupelo region also does not reflect the prevailing demography of Mississippi; it has a far lower proportion of African Americans than the state as a whole and reflects more the demographics of the Middle South than the Black Belt.

As a high-profile, relatively high-capacity rural site with the intention and the resources to change success patterns for youth, the Tupelo region is a prosing partner for learning and strategic outside investment.

Mobile, Alabama

The Place

The post-Great Recession recovery has produced a surge in manufacturing in Mobile and its environs. Long known for its charming downtown, its old-line Mardi Gras, its racial divisions, and its thriving port, Mobile and the South Alabama region now serve as a base for 40 companies from 20 countries. The Mobile Chamber of Commerce reports that Mobile County added nearly 5,000 manufacturing jobs from the end of 2009 to the end of 2014, led largely by the Austal USA shipbuilding facility. Meanwhile, the AIRBUS assembly plant announced in 2012 appears set to open in the fall of 2015. As a result, leaders in Mobile economic and workforce development speak of their efforts to meet the demand for labor as an urgent necessity.

Demographic data suggest a set of issues facing Mobile in providing highly qualified entrepreneurs, professionals, and manufacturing workers. Like much of Alabama, the Mobile area has had relatively modest population growth since 2000, 3.8 percent in

Mobile County, 10 percent in the South Alabama region. Only 28 percent of adults in the region have an associate's degree or higher, well below the U.S. rate of 37 percent.

Leadership and backbone organization

Toward the end of the 20th century, Mobile was so divided by political rivalry and race that its county and city governments would hardly talk to each other. Now, the city and its region appear to have made significant strides toward regional collaboration. A common governmental building was constructed about 20 years ago. And the transformation of the economy has impelled a spirit of collaboration within the ranks of local philanthropy, business, and education.

The key players are the [Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council](#), the [Community Foundation of South Alabama](#), [Mobile Area Education Foundation](#), the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce, Bishop State Community College, and the Mobile County public school system. Interestingly, the University of South Alabama doesn't come up in conversations, though it has surely bolstered the region's intellectual infrastructure.

Equity Framework

Such terms as youth mobility, youth engagement, and equity do not figure prominently in the language of economic development in Alabama. It appears that regional and community leaders, as well as key business interests, are engaged in efforts to upgrade workforce, but they speak in rather conventional terms.

Rebecca Byrne, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of South Alabama, spoke of a "real resurgence in job opportunities" that has made the South Alabama region "a land of opportunity." In her view, a major challenge is to shift the perception among young people to understand that postsecondary education to acquire a skill certification is a "very attractive option... That perception change is a slowly evolving thing."

The Community Foundation has taken the initiative in advancing the idea of an advanced manufacturing training facility. The area's training needs now transcend maritime and aviation industries, says Byrne, and now include steel, chemical, corrugated board, power generation, petro-chemical supply, all poised to grow and need highly trained skilled workers to do so. Under the plan in the works, Bishop State Community College would administer the facility.

Laura Chandler, executive director of SAWDC, said their findings from business surveys suggest that 18- to 24-year-olds "lack employability skills"—problems of tardiness, absences, and an inability to work in teams. Still, she held out hope that reorganization of the Alabama community college system would provide an "incredible opportunity" to bolster the region's efforts. "The community college system can play an integral role," she said. "I'm not sure we've scratched the surface of what it can be."

Backbone organization

The Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC) takes the lead in business engagement in workforce training. The chair of its board of directors is Sandra

Koblas of Austal USA, the Australian shipbuilding company. SAWDC is designated as one of Alabama's 10 regional units under the State Department of Commerce. A year ago, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions gave the agency its award for exemplary collaboration.

Employer engagement

SAWDC has a board consisting of representatives of both major employers and civic leadership. The board meets quarterly, and there seems to be a genuine effort to put employers at the center of regional strategy. "We're industry driven," said Chandler, SAWDC executive director.

Youth engagement

Youth engagement takes place in the conventional settings of high schools and community colleges. The education foundation has an annual career expo. The superintendent of Mobile schools has an industry advisory council to help guide educators efforts to point students toward careers.

Strengths and challenges

The surge in manufacturing has clearly energized the region. But, like much of Alabama, the region is not attracting a steady stream of in-migrants. Thus, it has to rely mostly on its own residents as the workforce of the near-future. There also has developed more Gulf Coast cooperation along the I-10 corridor from Gulfport, MS to Pensacola, FL.

SAWDC identifies five key clusters in Mobile and environs: Health care, aerospace, maritime, manufacturing, and construction. Indeed, for all the recent focus on manufacturing, the area is highly dependent on health and government employment. Austal has around 4,200 employees. The Mobile Public School system has 7,450, the University of South Alabama and its medical center 5,180, and Infirmity Health System 5,100.

Meanwhile, the community foundation is in the "early stages" of two initiatives. One is to focus on workforce training for still-young former military personnel. Byrne said there are 55,000 of them between 18 and 25 years old in the region. The second focus is to assist Bishop State in developing an advanced manufacturing training facility. Bishop State is one of the community colleges with a current vacancy in its president's office.

The Mobile region has emerged as a stronger metropolitan area than it was in the latter half of the 20th century. And it seems to have developed leadership with a sense of mission and optimism. Still, Mobile has much to learn in terms of broadening its approach to creating jobs and enhancing the mobility of young adults.

Houston, Texas

The Place

Houston, "The City with No Limits," is determined to remove the barriers to mobility for its youth and young adults. The Southern city is ranked in the top five in everything from

entrepreneurship to the best places for veterans and has the fastest growing economy in the nation. Houston's labor market has grown by 10 percent since 2009—five percent of the entire nation's net new job growth. As we stated in *State of the South*, Houston's infrastructure of opportunity challenge includes “human capital development, employment generation, and social financial supports necessary to help young people succeed.” So how do you connect Houston's young people to the city's exciting job growth? Education to employment partnerships.

Leadership and Backbone Organization

The city's Chamber of Commerce, the [Greater Houston Partnership](#), with its industry partners, created the *UpSkill Houston* initiative, focused on closing the skills gap by increasing the number of Texans trained for the city's 1.4 million middle-skills jobs. “We need to improve the education and training for and the image of middle-skill jobs,” said Bob Harvey, president and CEO of the Greater Houston Partnership. “People demean jobs that don't require a four-year degree, even though these are often good, high-paying jobs that can help transform lives. They provide not only a good salary, but have a real career ladder with the potential for even more growth. These are careers and professions, not just jobs.” Many of *UpSkill Houston*'s efforts are high school and community college-based (i.e., efforts to increase high school students' awareness of middle-skills jobs and encourage them to go to the local community college for training). Representatives from the local school districts and community colleges also sit on *UpSkill Houston*'s committees with employers.

Equity Framework

Houston has promising ideas on how to fill middle-skills jobs, but because of its geographic and demographic size, it is often difficult to share information and resources across the city and connect low-income youth and young adults to education and economically rewarding opportunities. With a \$275 million budget, Neighborhood Centers bring resources, education, and support to low-income communities via over 70 locations, many in workforce development centers. This social service nonprofit works across six key issue areas: economic opportunity, education, connection, health, housing and infrastructure and offer programming for youth, adults, seniors and immigrants. The president and CEO of Neighborhood Centers, Angela Blanchard, said, “We evolve in response to the larger regional story, and that story right now is about low-income families moving up the economic ladder.” Blanchard sits on the board of the Greater Houston Partnership and many industry leaders collaborate with Neighborhood Centers, providing cross-pollination of *UpSkill Houston*'s efforts with those of Neighborhood Centers.

Employer Engagement

Earlier this year, *UpSkill Houston* took a major step forward in changing that middle-skill jobs “perception” by combining forces with another initiative, [EnergizeHouston](#). *EnergizeHouston* was launched in 2013 as a collaboration among ExxonMobil and nine community colleges to attract, train, and place workers in petrochemical industry jobs. *EnergizeHouston* offers a strong job and training platform, a critical component for *UpSkill Houston*. ExxonMobil is investing \$500,000 in *UpSkill Houston*'s petrochemical initiative—Exxon's total commitment to *UpSkill Houston* stands at \$1.5 million. “We

expect new industry investment to attract thousands of jobs to the Houston area as our industry capitalizes on the abundant, affordable supplies of U.S. natural gas to produce chemicals,” said Matt Aguiar, senior vice president of ExxonMobil Chemical Company and co-chair of *UpSkill Houston’s* petrochemical committee. “The community colleges are preparing area residents to fill these new jobs and launch satisfying careers in the petrochemical industry.” Local community colleges have experienced increased enrollment in petrochemical-related programs. The colleges also plan to offer petrochemical dual credit courses for area high school students.

Another initiative in Houston, [*Accelerate Lone Star*](#), is aimed at helping underemployed young adults and adults complete workforce credentials that lead to educational pathways, higher wages, and careers. In a collaboration of the Lone Star College System, JPMorgan Chase, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission, *Accelerate Lone Star* has created career pathways for seven programs: machining, welding, roustabout, automotive technician, HVAC technician, patient care technician, and accounting assistant. Employers inform the curriculum, provide training opportunities for students, and provide professional development. As of fall 2014, the initiative has served over 500 students, 87 percent have received certificates, and 70 percent have found jobs or continued their education.

Youth Engagement

There is latent capacity for youth engagement in Houston, but not an active process. A number of organizations are working to connect with low-income people where they live, and one of the most promising efforts with potential to spur youth involvement is Neighborhood Centers, Inc. In a city so sprawling, it is difficult to connect with low-income neighborhoods, but Neighborhood Centers has made deep inroads with more than 70 centers based in existing organizations, such as workforce development centers. They bring information, support, and resources to underserved neighborhoods, making the work manageable by operating at the neighborhood level. But this strong community infrastructure has not been harnessed yet to mainstream employer activity, and there is a significant absence of connection with respect to the most disconnected young people.

Strengths and Challenges

JPMorgan Chase invested \$5 million in *UpSkill Houston* as part of its New Skills at Work initiative. A November 2014 [report](#) released by the company provided a framework for Houston to develop a demand-driven career pathways system. Recommendations for employers include sharing information with education and training providers to align programs with demand and increase capacity for internships, apprenticeships, and other work-based learning opportunities. The report stated that education institutions should develop “fast-track programs” to meet the needs of students and employers and design “stackable” credentials that can be aligned with career pathways. The report also called on community-based organizations to provide comprehensive supports (e.g., transportation, child care) to help students complete training programs.

On the state policy side, the state of Texas recently passed [HB 5](#), legislation that requires the establishment of graduation plans for all students and creates a pipeline to help with workforce demand. The legislation ensures that K-12 courses of study align with meaningful career options and encourages collaboration in curriculum design among K-

12, higher education and the business community. While this may be framed as a challenge in other areas of Texas, this is an opportunity for Houston to build on existing efforts to connect industry leaders with educators.

Houston has the beginnings of a strong talent development pipeline with several programs focused on preparing youth and young adults for the jobs of the city's new economy. Education-to-career efforts have benefitted heavily from having a strong backbone in the Greater Houston Partnership, which created a strong structure that brings employers, educators, and community-based organizations to the table. However, the table can be more inclusive by inviting others, who are often left out of the conversation, for example low-income youth and young adults. Houston must continue to work to create an equitable youth mobility strategy that builds on the area's strong economic foundation.

Greenville, South Carolina

The Place

Together with its twin city, Spartanburg, Greenville anchors the dynamic Upstate of South Carolina. Over the last 30 years, the city has made a heralded transition from its traditional roots as a textile-based marketing and manufacturing center to a high-growth, well diversified hub of advanced manufacturing, business services, higher education, and health care. The region is now experiencing a "secular turn toward manufacturing support": engineering, IT, and finance, all of which have higher educational requirements than manufacturing. Key to Greenville's evolution has been a deep commitment to public-private partnership that has spurred industrial development, downtown and neighborhood improvement, and a flourishing array of civic amenities. Active philanthropic institutions, notably a high-performing United Way, a strong community foundation, and the [Hollingsworth Funds](#), one of the state's largest private foundations, have helped launch or import nationally recognized innovations in early childhood education, middle school reform, workforce training (National Fund for Workforce Solutions), and support for business entrepreneurs (the [NEXT Innovation Center](#)). The University Center, a consortium of higher education institutions, is leading efforts to increase the number of young adults with "some college but no degree" who earn postsecondary credentials. Job growth in the Greenville area is projected to outpace the U.S. over the next 10 years, and while median family income still lags the nation, per capita income exceeds the national average. Many of the fundamental elements needed to build and sustaining a powerful infrastructure of opportunity for youth and young adults are emerging in Greenville. Still lacking, however, is an explicit, pervasive focus on economic preparation and connection for youth and young adults, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Leadership

Greenville's greatest leadership strength is the pervasive culture of engagement by people at the top of the civic and economic pyramid. The ethos is expressed through strong, traditional civic and business organizations that drive community improvement, notably the Chamber of Commerce and United Way. The community is less practiced in creating durable mechanisms in which leaders from diverse backgrounds and

perspectives can come together to tackle issues collaboratively. When the *Greenville News* recently illuminated a range of inequities in health, housing, and employment in the community, follow-through sputtered for lack of a bridging mechanism for inclusive problem-solving across races and income groups.

Equity Framework

There are promising pockets of activity underway to address serious inequities in Greenville. The philanthropic sector is driving important work to address early childhood and middle-school student success. The superintendent of Greenville County schools, with 72,000 students the largest district serving the community, is pushing implementation of Graduation Plus, a program to enable high school students to graduate with college credits and/or the technical certification required to access high-paying jobs. Specialty high schools are in place or under development to prepare students for the opportunity-rich health and entrepreneurial sectors of the economy. Dream Connectors, a business-driven career exploration/exposure program pioneered by Michelin, GE, the Greenville Health System, and the Riley Institute at Furman University, helps middle and high school students envision and prepare for living-wage careers. Greenville Works—a workforce collaborative funded by the National Fund for Workforce Solutions—is intentionally preparing underemployed adults for living-wage jobs and leveraging South Carolina’s statewide apprenticeship incentives to build a more inclusive local talent pipeline. Postsecondary access and success is squarely on the agenda of Greenville Tech, the local community college. Yet, essential as these efforts are, they are not yet grounded in a shared “education to career” analysis that is focused on helping all youth acquire the relevant labor-market credentials, experience, and connections. Nor is there yet a pervasive focus ensuring that youth and young adults on the margins have strong onramps to opportunity in the mainstream economy.

The Backbone Organization

Greenville has several centers of energy addressing aspects of the education-to-work continuum for youth. The United Way has the most explicit focus on supporting system change to prepare less-advantaged young people for educational success, and has leverage in the workforce development system as a key philanthropic partner of Greenville Works. The Chamber is beginning to match its strong ability to engage employers with attention to gaps in workforce preparation and economic success for Greenville’s current and emerging labor force.

There is potential for these important players to be aligned more deliberately to provide integrated backbone support for an education-to-work system for youth, but the issue is not on the civic agenda.

Employer Engagement

There is a powerful culture of employer engagement in Greenville, anchored in the corporate traditions of European manufacturers such as Michelin, BMW, and Bosch. Their example is being mirrored by important, locally based high-growth employers, notably the Greenville Health System, who have begun work on career exposure and guidance for youth. Good potential exists to leverage this leadership to help Greenville

build a talent development system that prepares youth and young adults for local, living-wage employment

Youth Engagement

Greenville's strong tradition of employer engagement is not matched by a prevailing practice or capacity for bringing voices outside the mainstream to tables of power. The community appears to lack well-developed and effective community-wide vehicles for youth engagement that could be harnessed to inform the work of an education-to-career system.

Strengths and Challenges

Greenville has formidable assets to bring to the task of building education-to-career pathways to enhance youth mobility. The economy is generating good-paying jobs in a range of high-growth sectors; economic leaders have a tradition of deep engagement in civic improvement activities; the foundations of a well-aligned school-to-employment educational infrastructure are present; local philanthropy is willing to invest in innovative programs and community infrastructure. Three principal challenges need resolution in order for a mobility infrastructure for youth to take shape and flourish: the good work of Greenville leaders needs to be informed by equity-based analysis of the performance gaps in the emerging education-to-career system; the community needs deeper capacity for youth engagement to ensure that the interests of youth—particularly disconnected youth—are central to education and employment strategies; the community needs focused backbone capacity to bring its disparate assets education, workforce, and youth development assets into strategic alignment to promote youth success and connection.

Brownsville, Texas

The Place

Brownsville is the southernmost city in Texas. Most residents of this border town live less than five miles north of the Mexican metropolis of Matamoros, where active drug cartels pose a challenge to economic stability. In the last several years, however, America's poorest city has been cultivating partnerships between educational institutions, employers and community leaders—all intended to raise the standard of living through investment in youth and local industries. One education to employment partnership called [*All In*](#)—catalyzed in 2010 by a \$1.4 million investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—formed just as Brownsville headed into a time of major institutional and economic change, including a resurgence of the manufacturing and aeronautics industries. This initiative, now coordinated by a former student-leader, continues to guide partners to the shared goal of doubling the number of young adults ages 16-24 who attain a postsecondary degree with local labor market value by 2025. In a city long familiar with intergenerational poverty, low-wage labor and poor educational outcomes, collective efforts like *All In* are harnessing the scrappy resilience and deep family care to change the story for the more than 66,000 15- to 24-year-olds here and their families.

Leadership

Since 2010, the United Way of Southern Cameron County has been convening education, community and industry leaders from more than 10 institutions as part of the *All In* initiative. These include employers like Wells Fargo, educational institutions like the newly formed University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and municipal organizations like the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce. One major task for the group—which leaders acknowledge took longer than expected—involved determining the data indicators that best represented Brownsville’s educational and economic health. The development of the 2013 Community Indicator Report required the United Way and the *All In* partnership coordinator to have frank conversations with institutional leaders about the importance of sharing educational and employment data that frequently was not flattering in an economically disenfranchised area. The successful release of this document solidified the United Way’s position as a trusted convener and publicly recognized other institutional leads (from the public schools and local universities) as leaders in the effort, too. In May 2015, a former student-leader took over the *All In* partnership coordinator role and will head up the updating of the Community Indicator Report for 2015.

Equity Framework

In Brownsville, *All In* leaders found that a major determining factor in the level of educational attainment was the degree to which parents had experience and/or familiarity with postsecondary options. In 2014 the *All In* partnership coordinator noted, “We... find that it’s easier for children of parents who are *not* first generation, who have navigated the system before [and who] have that academic socialization.” Notably, early leaders in the *All In* work proposed (with input of student focus groups) that young people already in college themselves provide academic socialization to their high school peers, many of whom came from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. A thriving program of “Student Ambassadors” resulted, wherein current students of several local postsecondary institutions returned to their alma mater high schools to teach college access and success skills. By building the leadership and skills of the community most personally affected by systemic civic underinvestment—in this case, young people themselves—*All In* demonstrates a critical component of an equity-focused infrastructure of opportunity.

The Backbone Organization

Since 2010, the United Way of Southern Cameron County has led the *All In* partnership, initially as the fiscal agent for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant, and now as the organization hosting and partially subsidizing the cost of the current *All In* partnership coordinator. The United Way regularly uses meeting rooms in their central office location to host *All In* team meetings, as well as other community collaborative events, and maintains a high reputation in the community as a facilitator and incubator of partnership efforts. The United Way has shared what they’ve learned learnings with other educational and civic organizations across the Rio Grande Valley in a collective impact effort called RGV Focus. Additionally, The United Way is also partnering with the Brownsville Economic Development Council and the Chamber of Commerce to develop a new project called the Talent Supply Chain Initiative.

Employer Engagement

In early June 2015, the Brownsville Economic Development Council (BEDC) reported a “development pipeline of activity worth more than \$11 billion” in various sectors, including heavy manufacturing, aeronautics and automotive industries.² This announcement comes on the heels of Brownsville’s selection as the newest site for the private spaceflight company SpaceX and the development of a partnership between that company and the newly formed University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, intended to develop a supply chain of aeronautics researchers and professionals. A June 2015 meeting convened by the Talent Supply Chain Initiative (composed of three All In partner organizations) drew more than 50 executive level leaders from many industries – manufacturing, skilled trades, logistics, medical health care, back office operations and finance. According to Lizzie Pugenat of BEDC, they came to collectively understand the challenges and opportunities presented with the incoming local workforce. “We are all part of the solution,” said Pugenat, referencing supply side efforts, “It’s not about pointing fingers, but determining what you’re bringing to the table.” The next step involves connecting a small group of employer leaders with educational leaders to explore industry-specific curriculum development at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. Much of this work builds on earlier work of the All In partnership, which has recently begun an employer mentorship program, equipping local employers to support students in a way that aligns with their current capacity.

Youth Engagement

In Brownsville, Student Ambassadors run a major college access program in K-12 settings and also participate as voting members in the *All In* partnership, particularly in the Policy and Practice task force. Notably, Student Ambassadors developed the initial framework for engaging parents in the *All In* partnership. Within their program, Ambassadors run everything from curriculum design and training to teacher engagement and evaluation. They have grown from a corps of six Ambassadors in 2013 to almost 20 in 2015 and reached more than 2,600 students in 15 Brownsville public schools in the 2014-2015 academic year.³ Pre-and post-assessment data show that “students know and understand the college process more after experiencing Student Ambassadors’ presentations”.⁴ Qualitative data of Student Ambassadors experience suggest that after participating in the program, youth “feel more comfortable with public speaking, have gained confidence in themselves... and take on leadership roles on the [University of Texas at Brownsville] campus and in the community.”⁵ One example of this increased community involvement is the recent hiring of a long-time Student Ambassador (now with a master’s degree) to the major position of *All In* Partnership Coordinator, on staff with the United Way.

² <http://www.bedc.com/news/bedc-adds-position-support-site-selectors>

³ B. Davila, All In Student Ambassador Coordinator. Personal communication, June 1st 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Strengths and challenges

Brownsville leaders are resilient, resourceful, and willing to collaborate, which has allowed this border town to survive and even thrive in a time of major institutional and economic changes. Since 2010, the community has seen two mayors, two superintendents, multiple new school board members and the complete restructuring of their postsecondary institution—yet their community partnership remains in place, stronger for surviving these changes. Residents have rejoiced at the arrival of a major private aeronautics company and the 500 or more jobs created, and yet local economic development organizations affirm that SpaceX is just the beginning of major economic development.

While it's true that Brownsville will likely always retain a degree of economic vulnerability because of proximity to Mexico and a historic underinvestment in human capital, the collaborative nature of efforts like the Talent Supply Chain Initiative are key in building an infrastructure of opportunity that can stabilize the area for years to come. By engaging youth in the programs and governance of these collaborations (like that of *All In*), the area is also placing bets on the abilities of local young people to develop the next generation of interconnected leadership. One data point in particular that indicates these bets are paying off is the fact that in 2014, every single Brownsville high school senior applied for college, whereas in 2008 less than half did. Additionally, 94% completed an application for federal or student aid—a critical step in accessing postsecondary education for a community consistently ranked as one of the poorest in America.

Conclusions and implications

A confluence of challenges is driving Southern communities to rethink their strategies about talent development. The South's traditional competitive advantage as a low-cost, low-skill region is vanishing. Entry-level skills requirements for living-wage employers are rising. Demographic shifts—the aging of the incumbent workforce and the changing racial and ethnic profile of new and potential entrants into the workplace—are undermining old orthodoxies about the composition of the workforce. The social and practical costs of maintaining the South's historic low-investment practices and policies, particularly toward youth of color, are increasingly undeniable.

The communities profiled here are mustering the will and leveraging the opportunity to do things differently in response to these trends. In all of them, a driving motivation is to meet the needs of employers to ensure that they succeed and grow as economic anchors for their regions, and backbone organizations of all stripes are working to engage employers in support of new education-to-career channels. Corresponding levels of intentional youth engagement are much rarer in the South. Where present, as in Durham and Brownsville, they reflect the conviction of leaders that engaging young people to inform the design of education-to-career opportunities and pathways can contribute to stronger youth participation and higher rates of persistence and success. And examples such as Brownsville demonstrate powerfully that deliberate engagement of young people from historically marginalized communities, coupled with visible support from adults in positions of institutional authority, can shift young people's aspirations, expectations, and success patterns on the education-to-career pathway.

Southern leaders—and philanthropy working in the South—have an opportunity to identify, strengthen, learn from, and proliferate the education-to-career work now underway so that we have more and more powerful exemplars that can address the region's stalled economic mobility patterns. Many more Southern communities need to engineer the backbone capacity required to forge cross-sector relationships among business, education, and community and youth leaders so that education-to-career systems reflect the needs of multiple customers. We need to infuse the work of systems redesign with an equity perspective that acknowledges the South's racially skewed investment patterns and honors the conviction that society benefits when everyone succeeds.

Building strong and responsive education-to-career pathways that serve Southern youth and employers will entail what Ron Heifetz terms technical and adaptive work by the region and its leaders. The technical work involves adapting best practices that are far more prevalent outside the region to improve employment readiness and increase postsecondary attainment for youth and young adults. The adaptive work involves confronting the deeply rooted and widely accepted cultural narratives that keep unacceptable patterns of youth and young adult economic success in place. The South has the capacity to undertake and make progress on both.



307 West Main Street
Durham, NC 27701-3215

Phone: 919.381.5802
Fax: 919.381.5805

www.mdcinc.org