

EQUITY

CAREER READINESS

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Renee Dyson, a registered nurse, founded New Nurse University to help people pass the national licensure exam.



JOHN R. BOEHM

SPRINGBOARDS TO CAREERS

Readiness programs emerge to shepherd high school and college students into jobs that open a path to financial stability and wealth-building

BY TATIANA WALK-MORRIS

Before Leyla Spells became a registered nurse, one major obstacle stood in her way: the National Council Licensure Examination, a standardized test she needed to pass. Spells had taken the exam three times, failing to answer the minimum number of questions correctly—spending hundreds of dollars each time to retake it.

Reflecting on her experience as a student at Northwestern College, a for-profit school that recently moved from suburban Bridgeway to Oak Lawn, Spells says she doesn't think her education there was up to par. After struggling to pass the licensure exam, she came across a Facebook group for Black nurses and learned about Chicago-based

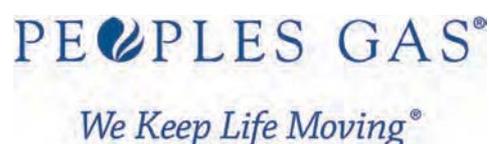
tutoring startup New Nurse University. She eventually took one-on-one tutoring from the company's founder, Renee Dyson, a registered nurse herself. And Spells went on to pass the exam.

"Honestly, I give 85-95% of that (credit) to Renee," Spells says.

Spells isn't alone in looking beyond the higher education system for help reaching a career goal. As America reckons with its student debt crisis, career readiness programs have emerged to shepherd high school and college students into jobs that will allow them to achieve financial stability and build

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wealth, especially among people who would otherwise be excluded from higher education. These programs complement or serve as an alternative to higher education as many students from marginalized backgrounds search for less expensive pathways into their desired industry or seek assistance not all colleges and universities can sufficiently provide.

Dyson launched New Nurse University in 2016 to help nursing students enter the field. She says her company has helped more than 1,500 students continue their nursing studies and pass the NCLEX. Most of the students who've come to her are women and people of color, and some of her students are working in programs that don't have tutoring services to help them master their studies, she says.

Nursing students "may not have a teacher that looks like them. They may not have the tutoring service available to them outside of when the nursing program closes for the day," Dyson says. "Our service is providing . . . mentorship to the students to stay in their programs, and we're bridging the gap like that."

Spells graduated from Northwestern College with about \$30,000 in student debt. Now that New Nurse University helped her pass her exam, the 26-year-old mother of two is living and working in Chicago as a travel nurse. She sees financial flexibility in her future: debts paid off, a home of her own, international travel, money for her children's education. She'd like one day to open a school to train certified nursing assistants.

Retiring student loan debt is another obstacle for former students like Spells. A 2022 Education Trust analysis found that Black women hold the most student loan debt a year after earning their undergraduate and graduate degrees. Black women hold \$38,800 in student debt on average a year after graduating with undergraduate degrees, more than the average for Black men (\$35,997), Indigenous/Alaska Native women (\$32,619), mul-

"WE WORK PROACTIVELY TO ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT AND TO ADDRESS THE CAUSAL FACTORS THAT ARE UNDERLYING THE SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES AND INEQUITIES OF ACCESS AND GRADUATION (IN) HIGHER EDUCATION."

Stacia Edwards, deputy provost, City Colleges of Chicago

ti-racial women (\$28,628), white men (\$24,348), Latinas (\$25,927), Latinos (\$26,582), Asian women (\$20,417), white women (\$27,068) and Asian men (\$20,829).

And while Black women have average student debt of \$58,252 a year after earning graduate degrees, Black men have \$49,416 on average, followed by multiracial women (\$43,984), Latinas (\$40,185), Latinos



Taleya Griffin landed a career in technology after completing Per Scholas professional development classes.

(\$31,971) Indigenous/Alaska Native women (\$36,795), white women (\$29,323), white men (\$25,905), Asian women (\$21,180) and Asian men (\$9,913), the analysis found.

Career readiness programs are helping students find jobs without incurring debt, and they show some promise in addressing the racial wealth gap, too, because they enable students to learn and immediately apply their new skills at jobs. The programs' success depends on

having strong job placement and helping students learn the soft skills that will help them succeed in the workplace, says Jenny Nagaoka, deputy director at the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research, which conducts research to inform and assess policies and practices at Chicago Public Schools.

Skills such as "showing up on time, collaboration skills, communication skills, being able to work through struggles and problems—these are things that are valuable in college, they're valuable at work," Nagaoka says. "Those are sort of like universal things that matter a lot.

That these programs are structured in ways that are sort of designed to support this can be really effective."

CIRCUMVENTING STUDENT DEBT

With the fate of President Joe Biden's student debt cancellation efforts in the hands of the Supreme Court, programs like that of Per Scholas, a multistate nonprofit that trains students for tech jobs, are helping students avoid debt and get their foot into the door of potential employers. The organization offers courses on cybersecurity, software engineering and Amazon Web Services. It set up its Chicago location in June 2020.

In addition to the technical training, Per Scholas does weekly professional development classes during which students craft résumés, create LinkedIn profiles and practice doing remote and in-person job interviews. For students who need additional assistance in times of need, the organization also provides emergency funds for those in crisis, gives Lyft rides to job interviews and connects students with a guidance counselor in times of difficulty, says Andi Drileck, managing director of Per Scholas' Chicago office.

The majority of the students Per Scholas serves are people of color, and about a third are women. So far, the Chicago office has trained

250 technologists, a spokesperson for the organization confirms.

"We're trying to diversify the tech sector. Sometimes it feels like baby steps, quite frankly," Drileck says. "We're making a big effort, but there is a really long way to go."

For Taleya Griffin, the diversity of Per Scholas was particularly appealing. While studying information technology at the University of Cincinnati, Griffin says many of the people in her program did not look like her, but she saw plenty of other students of color at Per Scholas, where she received training in user desktop support.

Griffin enrolled in Per Scholas in July after her grandmother got sick and she decided to return to Chicago. And after working for FedEx for about a year, she found Per Scholas was the pathway for her to get back into tech. She heard about the program on TikTok.

After completing the program in October, she is set to start a new job at DTI, an IT consulting and networking firm, as a junior analyst consultant in the company's apprenticeship program. In the long term, she wants to help her peers get exposure to different career paths, because she wasn't aware of her full career prospects until she went away to college, she says.

Now that she has her new job,

the 21-year-old Auburn Gresham resident says she looks forward to having a manageable schedule that will let her do the things she enjoys, particularly roller skating.

Why roller skating? "Because I get to feel the air, I get to feel free," Griffin says. "I can be happy because before I was always figuring out what was next. . . Now I could do what I want to do. Like, if I want to go skating, I can incorporate that within my day. If I want to work out, I can put that in my day."

A START AT CLOSING GAPS

Alongside organizations looking to help women and people of color, Ada S. McKinley, a nonprofit providing employment, family and community services in Chicago, Wisconsin and Indiana, assists people with disabilities to find jobs. The organization also recently received an American Rescue Plan grant to assist and train young Chicagoans, says Eric Edquist, senior vice president of employment and community support services at Ada S. McKinley.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies have recognized the value of workers with disabilities, Edquist says. The nonprofit doesn't share job seekers' personal information with employers, but they try to prepare the employee for the job upfront



After that experience, finding Ada S. McKinley “helped me grow throughout the years. It was kind of hard for me to be around people,” Hollins says. “And so Ada S. McKinley helped me to develop good communication and people skills.”

PIPELINE FOR EMPLOYERS

For employers, career programs offer a pipeline to up-and-coming talent among high school and college students. Citadel and Citadel Securities teamed up with Thrive Scholars to launch two programs: the Citadel Securities Externships, a two-week program for college sophomores and seniors, and the Thrive Summer Academy, a six-week program for college freshmen.

As part of the programs, Citadel provides training that covers skills from résumé writing and learning math to mastering Python—a high-level programming language—and HTML, as well as mentorship from the firm’s employees. For Citadel, the collaboration adds another pipeline of students who may have an interest in finance and who wouldn’t otherwise be exposed to the industry, says Matt Jahansouz, chief people officer at Citadel.

“We have a strong pipeline of talent, but to the extent that we could feed that with a new channel, we were all about it. And we realized getting to those students as early as possible is going to be an important part of that strategy,” Jahansouz says.

David Opoku-Ware, a sophomore at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, says he enjoyed connecting with Citadel employees, its hospitality and housing, and meeting other students.

“I’ve kind of opened my eyes up to careers in a business world or finance world just because I’ve never really looked into that or seen that as a career path for myself. The only thing I’ve known about business or the closest thing I’ve known to it is ‘Shark Tank.’ I didn’t know what business entails. What goes on? Is it like a feasible career? Seeing how it overlaps with technology especially made me want to look more into pursuing a career in that.”

Similarly to nonprofit career readiness programs, City Colleges of Chicago has many students of color who will be the first in their families to graduate college. In recent years, City Colleges has launched programs like the Fresh Start initiative, which eliminates the education debts of former City Colleges students who want to return to their studies. Besides the training needed to find or change jobs, City Colleges also provides clothing for people interviewing for jobs, résumé preparation and other career counseling for students.

“We work proactively to eliminate barriers to employment and to address the causal factors that are underlying the socioeconomic disparities and inequities of access and graduation (in) higher education,” says Stacia Edwards, deputy provost of City Colleges of Chicago. “We’re a community college, and so I really believe that that’s why we’re here . . . because we are accessible.”

so that they can thrive.

“What we’ve seen is people with disabilities being really consistent with work, falling in lines with the company culture,” Edquist says. “We hear many more positive things than negative things.”

The organization hosted a job fair in October during which it brought in employers such as the Greater Chicago Food Depository, Roosevelt University and the Chicago Urban League. It has 25 contracts with state, federal and commercial entities to provide custodial maintenance, Edquist says.

“I think we’re at the start of closing wealth gaps,” Edquist says. “And one of our goals is working with people to be employed just to meet basic needs. There’s definitely value in self-dignity, self-worth of having a job and contributing to an employer or our economy or our country. But a big part of our goals with this is people being able to meet basic needs of having a home, purchasing a winter coat, things like that.”

For Keisha Hollins, working with Ada S. McKinley to get a job as a quality control associate was a key to coming out of her shell. She was placed in special education classes during high school, which came with a stigma. As a result, she had a hard time opening up to people without feeling like they were going to cause her distress, she says.

Career programs could use more funding, leaders say

Program leaders seek to go beyond training marginalized students. They want to assist them in overcoming systemic inequities blocking their progress.

BY TATIANA WALK-MORRIS

Following its 2020 launch in Chicago, Per Scholas, which trains students for tech jobs, now has a waitlist for some of its Chicago classes, says Andi Drileck, managing director of Per Scholas’ Chicago office. Money is the biggest factor preventing the organization from offering more classes, she says.

“What an opportunity it would be in Chicago to be able to expand our resources so that more people can take advantage of this, and then the workforces can get diversified and the shortage of tech workers can be filled,” Drileck says.

For career readiness programs preparing students for their next move, doing so requires substantial support from companies, particularly financially and in terms of having open positions. With the limited resources they have available, career readiness programs are trying to go beyond training marginalized students for their future careers to also assist them in overcoming the systemic inequities interfering with their progress.

Eric Edquist, senior vice president of employment and community support services at Ada S. McKinley, a social services nonprofit serving people in Chicago, Wisconsin and Indiana, notes that the organization could use

more funding to support its numerous services, which include tutoring, counseling, employment training and Head Start programs. And when working with employers who are seeking to hire people with disabilities, it’s also helpful when those employers support the organization’s efforts to prepare the employee before starting their job.

“When (employers) allow us to do that, they’re patient and they definitely start seeing the value of the person’s adding—the results down the road are fantastic,” Edquist says.

For Renee Dyson, a registered nurse and founder of tutoring service New Nurse University, the grant she recently received from New York-based business consulting firm Next Street will enable her to hire at least two more people to help her run her company. New Nurse provides mentorship and tutoring to nursing students seeking help with passing their National Council Licensure Examination.

“In addition to my self-serve on-demand library, now I really want to have tutors and staff that help me with the back end of the business,” Dyson says. “I want an affiliate program where the

students can refer and get paid to put money in their pockets. I’m just trying to do everything.”

As much as career readiness programs try to help students reach their career goals, they’re also combating challenges outside of the classroom. Jenny Nagaoka, deputy director at the University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research, points to City Colleges of Chicago and the University of Illinois Chicago as examples of institutions that are trying to support students outside of the classroom.

“There’s still a lot more work to be done, but there’s an understanding that this is a problem that they need to be grappling with,” Nagaoka says. “Colleges and high schools can be a piece of the solution, but at its root, they’re putting a Band-Aid on a much larger

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Jenny Nagaoka, deputy director at the University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research

problem. And if they do want their students to succeed, they need to be doing everything they can to be positioning their students to be successful.”



Per Scholas learners engaged in an IT Support training cohort.

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PER SCHOLAS