



Research Summary

About the Project

The Greater Twin Cities United Way (GTCUW) understands that what you measure matters. In this spirit, they created a learning project in 2022 to explore alternatives to the traditional six workforce development metrics and the role these guiding metrics could play in influencing racial equity change in workforce development. GTCUW enlisted its 2022-2025 Economic Opportunity Employment & Training grantees with identifying a program metric that more closely aligns with that organization's mission and is a stronger signal of the organization's desired impact. They then tasked the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) with researching how other organizations are creating incremental and systemic changes with similar guiding metrics—especially related to racial equity, job quality, and economic mobility for low-income job seekers and workers—and what GTCUW grantees can leverage and learn.

Through this project, the GTCUW seeks to better understand how non-profit organizations in the Twin Cities region support groups of people who have experienced marginalization and oppression, how organizations leverage—or could leverage—their power to negotiate and influence employers, education, funders, and government towards change, and how philanthropic leaders like the Greater Twin Cities United Way can harness that influence to move systems toward greater equity.

Background

The workforce development field has established metrics that frame the narrative of the sector's work. Among the six primary indicators of program performance, three indicators are employment-related and are most directly connected to the labor market: entered employment, job retention, and median earnings within a certain time frame after program completion. The other indicators measure credential attainment, skills gains, and effectiveness in serving employers. Although useful for understanding certain trends, these metrics cannot identify structural inequities or systems of oppression at play because they are transactional and centered on individuals rather than the system.

In addition, these standard metrics obscure the workforce development system's inability to influence economic mobility. Recent research showed that not only were the median earnings of low-wage workers completing federally-funded job training about \$10,000 less than the real median personal income of \$33,706 for all workers, but these earnings convert to an hourly wage that is less than \$15 per hour—a minimum yardstick used by advocates for improving living standards for low-wage workers. New metrics could better tell stories of systemic change that inspire new ways of programming, funding, evaluating, and theorizing.¹

1 <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/multiple-measures-approach-workforce-equity/>

Participating Organizations

The following lists the 2022-2025 Economic Opportunity Employment & Training grantee cohort participants and their identified metric that is mission-aligned and represents a more effective signal of impact for the organization.

American Indian Family Center

Identified metric: Number of employers who have employee assistance programs with services for domestic violence survivors

Through this metric, the American Indian Family Center hopes to influence the intersectionality of two barriers to job placement and retention: culturally responsive workplace policies and access to resources that support the independence of domestic violence victims and survivors.

American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC)

Identified metric: Percentage of program completer's income compared to white peers

Rather than look at hourly wage upon job placement, a standard workforce development metric, the American Indian OIC uses wages as a proxy for household income and compares it to the average household income of their white peers, effectively measuring the organization's impact on closing the racial wealth gap.

International Institute of Minnesota (IIMN)

Identified metric: Percentage of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) promoted into leadership positions compared to white peers

This metric assesses BIPOC worker access to career advancement. IIMN's theory of change assumes that if corporate cultures are truly inclusive, then corporate leadership will be more reflective of the composition of their labor supply. This metric will help IIMN home in on systemic policies and practices that are preventing BIPOC populations from advancing.

Somali Success School

Identified metric: Number of community events attended

The Somali Success School is looking at one metric to assess two aspects of impact. The first assumes awareness of and comfort in participating in community events—that program participants feel like a part of their respective communities, including the schools their children attend. The second assumes that immigrant visibility in the community—actively participating in and contributing to that community's prosperity—will help dispel myths and fears that often follow immigrant populations.

Ujamaa Place

Identified metric: Number and strength of family connections

Guided by their theory of transformation, a strong, personal support system is essential for returning citizens. By tracking this metric, Ujamaa Place can confirm the relationship between strong family support and successful reentry into a community and workplace;

thus leading to a stronger intervention point that will positively impact program outcomes.

Rather than focus on a metric, the following organizations are looking for proofs of concept that support new ways of approaching workforce development programs and partnerships.

East Side Employment xChange

Identified metric: Measure the impact the collaborative has on program staff capacity and the ability to attract new business partners.

The xChange is a collaborative effort to engage employers and community organizations in creating more equitable and more numerous employment opportunities for residents of the East Side of St. Paul. The xChange is trying to measure its impact as a place-based collaborative backbone organization, especially as they work towards a “no wrong door” approach to program services and job placement.

Minnesota Teamster Service Bureau

Identified metric: Program completion and wage increase as a result of paid incumbent worker training.

It is challenging for low-wage workers to access and complete the training they need to upskill into high-growth, higher-wage occupations, especially if that training represents additional financial burdens like childcare or higher transportation costs. It is because of this that the Minnesota Teamsters Service Bureau provides a living wage to training program participants.

Observations and Research Summary

On the surface, the metrics seem largely unconnected—two assess personal social networks, one centers on employee wages while another on employee benefits, and the final one on career advancement. Only two are explicitly equity-focused. And yet, a strong argument can be made that all these metrics contribute to conditions that are vital to a sense of belonging in society and in the workplace.

Belonging is a feeling of security and support that occurs when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group. Creating genuine feelings of belonging for all is a critical factor in improving participant engagement and program performance.² When people feel like they belong, there is a greater sense of community and, therefore, a greater personal stake in that community’s success. In addition, when a sense of belonging is truly present, individuals have a network of supports and resources they can call upon to face and overcome challenges that would otherwise threaten personal progress.

This is particularly true for populations facing open discrimination and judgment. Four of the cohort members target populations that encounter blatant societal bias because of the perception that their circumstances are solely the result of personal choices: immigrants, returning citizens, and victims and survivors of domestic abuse. In some cases, this bias is codified in and condoned by legal and business policies and practices.

2 <https://diversity.cornell.edu/belonging/sense-belonging>

Two of the organizations focused on equity metrics within the workplace—income or wage equity and equal ability to pursue career advancement—both of which are impacted by a business’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. It is important to note that when DEI efforts are implemented effectively, a culture that promotes a “sense of belonging” is the result.³ To put it another way: Diversity is a fact. Inclusion is a behavior. But belonging is the emotional outcome that people want in their organization. The workplace metrics selected—equitable wages and BIPOC’s vertical representation in a business—are indicative of conditions that occur when all workers are treated with dignity and respect, valued and deemed worthy of investment, and instilled with a sense of purpose in their respective workplace communities.

When it comes to metrics, diversity data and wages are easier to assess. A sense of belonging, however, can be more challenging to measure. Some use focus groups, informational interviews, skip-level reviews, employee satisfaction, and pulse surveys to assess belonging in the workplace; more quantitative indicators of satisfaction include length of tenure, sick leave, number of grievances, and attrition rates. Disaggregating these data points by diversity metrics would help reveal if specific demographics feel more, or less, supported by the existing corporate culture.

The main takeaway from this research project is that all five systems change metrics assess conditions that contribute to one’s “sense of belonging” in their respective environments, whether it be in the workplace or in the community. There is a growing body of work dedicated to promoting and measuring a sense of belonging in community, education, and workplace settings. Sense of belonging is one of the workforce metrics used by Cornell University; they reference six resources to support this metric from LinkedIn, Forbes, Wharton School of Business, Glassdoor, Gallup, and the Wall Street Journal. Many youth development programs, including the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, feature belonging as a central piece in their theories of change, and belonging scores were positively related to actual program attendance over a 6-month period, self-reported attendance in the last week, and protective factors found in communities.⁴ Research has demonstrated that reentering individuals with close social bonds are more likely to secure employment, experience better mental health, exhibit lower levels of hostility, desist from criminal activity, and avoid recidivating.⁵ One’s sense of belonging is even a significant predictor of mental health and well-being in later life.⁶

In an evaluation of a workforce program for domestic violence survivors in New York City, 6 of the 10 short-term outcomes Urban Institute used concerned the removal of social and psychological barriers that hinder survivors from succeeding on the job, including their

3 “Diversity” refers to who is represented in the workforce in terms of age, gender identity, race, ethnicity, physical ability, and neurodiversity. “Equity” refers to fair treatment for all people, meaning the norms, practices, and policies in place ensure identity is not predictive of opportunities or workplace outcomes. “Inclusion” refers to how the workforce experiences the workplace and the degree to which organizations enable them to make meaningful contributions. The three of these values create an equation that, if executed effectively, results in a worker’s sense of belonging.

4 <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316402236882>

5 <https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/social-support-during-incarceration-predictors-external-social-support#:~:text=Research%20has%20demonstrated%20that%20reentering,criminal%20activity%2C%20and%20avoid%20recidivating>

6 <https://bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12877-021-02115-y>

connectedness to the community. Their report states, “Staff reported that addressing social isolation and improving clients’ social connectedness are important short- and long-term objectives, particularly because many clients come from other countries or states and attempt to make New York City their home.”⁷

Assessing a Sense of Belonging

One popular instrument used to assess a sense of belonging in community-based programs is Hagerty and Patusky’s Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI).⁸ The SOBI is a 27-item, self-report instrument consisting of two separately scored scales, SOBI-P (psychological state) and SOBI-A (antecedents). The Validation of Social Connectedness in Mainstream Society and the Ethnic Community Scales is a common tool used to assess a sense of belonging for immigrants and refugee populations; it has validity in predicting subjective well-being and their distinctive utility in addition to other established constructs of general social connectedness, acculturation, enculturation, ethnic identity, and other group orientations. The Psychological Sense of Community Scale (PSOC) is an adaptable tool that has been used for returning citizens; it has a theoretical framework involving Entity, Membership, and Self and has been found to have high internal reliability. These tools represent a modest sample of potential assessments available.

Next Steps for Greater Twin Cities United Metro Way

- 1. “Sense of belonging” may or may not resonate among the 2022-2025 Economic Opportunity Employment & Training grantee cohort.** Host facilitated conversations to explore if this potential theme resonates and how it might impact the systems change metrics they selected.
- 2. Organizations may choose to refine or add a systems change metric to reflect this theme.** For example, those who selected an employment-focused metric may choose to add a sense of belonging metric to assess the potential correlation between the two. Those who selected belonging metrics based in the community may opt to add an employment metric given the symbiotic relationship of employment and one’s sense of belonging.
- 3. If there is interest in the potential for collective impact in the Greater Twin Cities region, the cohort may want to explore the adoption of one uniform “sense of belonging” scale assessment.**
- 4. Consider providing technical assistance and individualized coaching to strengthen the cohort’s internal data cultures, the quality of data collected to strengthen strategy, and the organizations’ abilities to tell the stories of their impact.** In general, the cohort struggled to identify a quantifiable metric without guidance or supports.
- 5. Reconvene the cohort in one year to assess what happened when using these systems change metrics.** If GTCUW decides to pursue this, work with organizations upfront to refine their selected systems change metrics and establish baseline measurements to make it easier to identify shifts in outcomes.

7 <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/105178/an-evaluation-of-a-workforce-development-program-for-domestic-violence-survivors.pdf>

8 <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/s/sense-of-belonging-instrument-sobi-p-sobi-a/> or <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15335777>