



[www.jsonline.com](http://www.jsonline.com) | [Return to regular view](#)

**Original Story URL:**

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=424336>

## Getting a grip on skilled workers

**Trade groups need minorities and women to fill a coming labor shortage. Recruiting programs are in t**

By **LEONARD SYKES** and **TANNETTE JOHNSON-ELIE**  
[lsykes@journalsentinel.com](mailto:lsykes@journalsentinel.com)

*Posted: May 16, 2006*

Margaret Woolridge is an 18-year-old engineering student at Bradley Tech High School with an infant son named DeShaun and a 4.0 grade point average. She takes welding, works part time at a hardware store and is on the school's state-ranked sprint relay team.

*Advertisement* A generation ago, she would have been an ideal candidate for trade or technical school. But this National Honor Society member, worried that preparing for a career in the trades would be too demanding right now, instead plans to major in psychology next fall at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

With construction projects queued up and a rapidly emptying pipeline of workers, Milwaukee trade groups realize they need to get serious about recruiting students like Woolridge: minorities and women.

Overwhelmingly, current apprentices are white males, and there aren't nearly enough of them to fill the thousands of skilled jobs that will materialize in the next decade.

Partly because the industry has woken up to a problem that some say is self-inflicted, and partly because of advocacy by minority groups, new recruiting and training programs are under way this spring, though some critics say they are too little, way too late.

The labor crisis has been building for years.

"We know there is a projected shortage out there," said John Topp, executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin. "Our own study predicts that 50 percent of our labor force is going to be retiring within the next 10 years. Now, if you've got 12,000 people working in our industry and 6,000 are going to be retiring within the next 10 years, you'd better get busy."

A study conducted for the council by Northstar Economics, an economic research firm in Madison, gave

this picture of the impending retirement of baby boomers from the construction industry: Over the next 15 years, 50% of the 30,000 journeymen working on projects in southeastern Wisconsin will retire and have to be replaced, during what many project will be a building boom for the construction industry. The industry is projected to grow 43% in a decade, Topp said.

"I kind of think of it as a tsunami," said Dale Dulberger, director for the 21st Century Urban Technical Education Project at the Milwaukee Area Technical College. "All of a sudden, it's going to hit and people will be saying, 'Why haven't we been doing more to prepare students for technical careers?' For the industry, it's going to be a big barometer of whether jobs stay in this community."

### **Shift toward college**

Skill with a nail gun or an Allen wrench used to be a ticket to lifelong employment and solid middle-class income. But over the last 20 years, as educators and parents pushed academically talented minority students toward college, those with the interest or inclination to pursue the trades were ignored. Programs were cut and student interest waned.

Willie Jude, recently retired principal of Custer High School and a 30-year veteran of the Milwaukee Public Schools system, remembers when every high school and middle school in MPS had a trade shop. Now, only five high schools offer trade programs. Many of those old wood, auto and crafts shops have been turned into computer labs, or are vacant, he said.

Meanwhile, some interested graduates aren't academically qualified to enter apprenticeship programs. Quite a few, said Jude, have trouble passing the basic apprentice entrance exam before the Joint Apprenticeship Committee sponsored by the trade unions. The test requires simple computation in sixth-grade math and reading.

About 80% of the jobs in the labor market don't require four-year college degrees, some labor analysts say.

So why is it, minority advocacy groups started asking, that the industry has not aggressively increased the scope and intensity of its efforts to recruit minorities and women?

The Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP issued a report in March on the minimal numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics in the skilled trades and apprenticeship programs. It documented data gathered from state employment statistics on the near-absence of minority apprentices last year.

The report found that there were 11 white apprentices for every African-American apprentice who entered the skilled trades in the fall of 2005; there were 14 whites for every Hispanic apprentice during that same period.

### **Recruitment needs to change**

Lois M. Quinn, a researcher in the Employment & Training Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, was one of the authors of the study. She said recruitment needs to be more expansive and involve more channels to be effective in attracting minorities into skilled trade jobs.

Big Step, a training and placement partnership that works to place central-city workers in construction jobs, is not sufficient by itself, she suggested.

"Business as usual is why we have 11 whites being trained for every one African-American," she said. "The feeling is that as long as they give some money to Big Step, that is where your apprentices are supposed to come from. There is no one program for whites to get in. They're recruited through all of those long-term networks that have been established over generations."

The NAACP report was a wake-up call, said Earl Buford, executive director of the Big Step program, which with the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership has emerged since 1999 as the main vehicles for recruiting and preparing candidates for the trades. Big Step and the training partnership together operate the Center for Excellence, which prepares candidates for various apprenticeship tests.

### **Starting on strategies**

Catalyzed by the report, a strategy shared by non-profits, schools and unions is starting to coalesce.

Last week, Dulberger helped pull together a conference in Pewaukee between trade unions and educators aimed at improving the recruiting of minorities to the skilled trades and apprentice programs. Attendees included members of the Carpenters Union, Bricklayers Union and others, plus representatives of MATC, Big Step and the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership.

Also, the Construction Labor Council has begun talking with the NAACP about the recruiting issue.

"There's been too much emphasis that you need a four-year degree as a measure of success," Dulberger said. "Obviously in the technical colleges, we're interested in students who want to go on to professional (apprentice) programs."

"I think we should be better at not limiting the options (for students). You've got to give some significant weight on going into those technical areas. Part of the reason is those jobs are going to pay a lot of money."

Part of the task will be persuading young people such as Woolridge to take on the challenge of a career in the trades. As a new mother, she says she isn't quite ready for all it would demand.

"I really want to go into a trade," Woolridge said. "Once I grasp some things and get a feel for what motherhood is like and being able to pull it all together, I hope to later go back for engineering."

From the May 17, 2006 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
Have an opinion on this story? [Write a letter to the editor](#) or start an [online forum](#).

Subscribe today and receive 4 weeks free! [Sign up now](#).

© 2006, Journal Sentinel Inc. All rights reserved. | [Produced by Journal Interactive](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)  
Journal Sentinel Inc. is a subsidiary of [Journal Communications](#).