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Context

Before launching into detail on the leading practices of Next-Gen Workforce Providers, let's consider the backdrop against which their work and that of Project Catapult is happening:

- **BOSTON MIRRORS BROADER U.S. TRENDS IN TERMS OF DECLINING ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND RISING INCOME INEQUALITY.** To make matters worse, Boston is currently ranked #7 in terms of U.S. cities with the highest income inequality (Massachusetts is ranked #6 in terms of U.S. states), according to the Boston Foundation's *Boston's Booming...But for Whom?* report. This makes it harder for people to advance upward (and emphasizes the importance of finding not just any job, but a good job).³ As stated in the first *Catapult Paper*, "This is Boston's economy—white hot, innovating and expanding, and leaving thousands behind."⁴ (See next section for more context on the *Catapult Papers*.)
- **PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED BY INCOME INEQUALITY AND UNEMPLOYMENT.** The unemployment rate in Massachusetts in the first quarter of 2019 was 2.7% for White workers but 5.1% for Black workers and 4.2% for Hispanic workers.⁵ Many Next-Gen Workforce Providers continuously emphasized that workforce development is inherently an issue of equity. As David Delmar of Resilient Coders put it, "It is morally and economically unacceptable: We are systematically failing a generation that is about to be out of work."
- **INCOME INEQUALITY IS EXACERBATED BY THE SKYROCKETING COST OF LIVING IN BOSTON.** Boston is the tenth most expensive city to live in the U.S., while Massachusetts is the third most expensive state, exemplified by the fact that the median price for a home in Massachusetts is 70% higher than the national figure.⁶

- **THE RISING COST OF LIVING IS PUSHING WORKERS OUT OF THE CITY AND AWAY FROM AVAILABLE JOBS.** This makes it even more difficult for employers to find workers and workers to find jobs. In the words of Year Up's Greater Boston Executive Director, Bob Dame, workers "are getting squeezed out of the city. This makes it hard [for us] to serve them because the majority of available jobs reside closer to the city."
- **IN THE MIDST OF THESE CHALLENGES FOR WORKERS, EMPLOYERS ARE ALSO STRUGGLING TO FILL THEIR TALENT NEEDS.** Given low unemployment rates and evolving needs for new skills, employers are finding it difficult to identify candidates who meet their needs. A 2016 employer survey by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education indicated that 75% of employers were having difficulty finding talent and cited this as a top barrier to company growth, and this continued to be a theme we heard from employers in our 2019 interviews.⁷

Given the complexity of these systemic challenges, the role of workforce provider organizations that help lift up untapped talent—those often viewed as "left behind" in this economic boom—to meet market demand becomes all the more important.⁸ And given the centrality of their role, it is all the more important that they do it well and in a coordinated manner. This is where Project Catapult comes in.

About Project Catapult and the Next-Gen Workforce Provider Competencies

Project Catapult was launched in 2017 in the wake of a call to action in the *Pinkerton Papers: Job Quality Series*, by distinguished workforce development practitioner and theorist Steven Dawson, who argued

that these times require redesigned institutions, new investment, and a very different approach to workforce development in order to address skills shortages and income inequality.⁹

In response, the Boston Foundation and SkillWorks launched Project Catapult with a vision to set up the Boston workforce system to function more efficiently, create deeper partnerships, and support retention and advancement for workers, such that the leading practices outlined here are institutionalized, even in times of economic downturn. Project Catapult has adopted a three-part strategy to support this vision: Leverage Catapult Networks, Leadership & Learning Labs, and Learning Communities to (a) build capacity across the workforce field (with a focus on workforce providers), (b) streamline and deepen direct services to jobseekers and incumbent workers as a network of incentivized partners (including employers), and (c) create a public platform focused on lessons learned, promising practices, and systems change in Greater Boston.

As part of the launch of Project Catapult, the Boston Foundation published *The Catapult Papers*, a four-part series on the future of workforce development. These were authored by Jerry Rubin, President and CEO of Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Boston, and Rougui Diallo, Chief of Staff of Resilient Coders, based on their organizations' own transition toward becoming Next-Gen Workforce Providers. (Note: Since JVS

Boston's work is a large focus of *The Catapult Papers*, it will not be heavily featured in this report).

The Catapult Papers argued for workforce development organizations that are consciously designed to respond to the challenges and opportunities of this economic moment. Specifically, they defined Next-Gen Workforce Providers as organizations that are seeking to expand opportunity for lower-income individuals and create competitive advantages for employers in need of workers, and that illustrate four key competencies:*

- **BEING MARKET RESPONSIVE:** Developing deep relationships with employers and being nimble in response to economic changes
- **FOCUSING ON GOOD JOBS:** Preparing workers (and employers) for long-term, quality employment
- **LIFTING UNTAPPED TALENT:** Supporting talent from “non-traditional” backgrounds
- **INVESTING IN ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY:** Developing capabilities to power the organization and maximize impact

This report builds on *The Catapult Papers* by exploring each of these four competencies in further detail, outlining the leading practices that Next-Gen Workforce Providers are exhibiting within them, and illuminating gaps and opportunities for further development across the Greater Boston ecosystem.

* In the spirit of continuous learning, these competencies have been refined since *The Catapult Papers* were published. The versions listed here reflect the latest iteration, which is used to organize this report. For additional background on the four competencies, please refer to *The Catapult Papers*.