

# Mentor program aims for more diversity in construction industry

**Megan Turchi**

Boston.com Staff

March 28, 2018 1:08 pm

Lillia Sakher is the only woman in her class, but there is a Boston program hoping to change that.

Sakher, who is originally from Algeria, moved to the United States in January 2017 after receiving her master's degree in architecture, civil engineering, and town planning in France. She is now a student at [Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology](#) in its construction management program.

"Am I in the right school?" Sakher said she asked herself on the first day of class. It was quite different from her program in France, where nearly half the people in her major were women.

Her doubts soon transitioned into confidence after she was accepted into the Construction Mentor Program, the brainchild of Nicole Richer of [Compliance Mentor Group](#). The mentor program works in conjunction with the institute and Madison Park Technical Vocational High School to get students working one day a month on a construction site.

Richer, whose background is in construction management, founded Compliance Mentor after the company she was working for had difficulty meeting [city requirements for women and minority hires](#). Private development projects that are more than 50,000 square feet and any public one must meet the following criteria: 51 percent Boston residents, 40 percent people of color, and 12 percent women.

But overall in 2017, those requirements were not met, according to the City of Boston. The projects required to meet those criteria had an average of 30 percent Boston residents, 34 percent minority workers, and 5 percent women.

[Karilyn Crockett](#), director of economy policy and research, small business development for the City of Boston, said the city's requirements are there to make sure developers and contractors know what is expected of them.

She also noted that apprenticeships, like the mentor program, can help draw people into the field.

"We want to make sure people can enter the trade, and there is a job," Crockett added.

In addition to helping companies have a more diverse workforce, the mentor program teaches students about the industry.

“[We] expose them to a variety of careers,” Richer said. Currently the students in the program are working with mentors while they construct Klarman Hall, a convening complex at Harvard Business School.

“Every time we come [to the construction site], there come different challenges,” said Ardi Elshani, a second-year construction management student at Benjamin Franklin. Elshani also noted that the program, his mentors, and Richer have helped him improve his resume, learn how to interview, and develop his networking skills.

Developers have reported a [skilled labor shortage](#), a shortage some real estate industry analysts say is contributing to the region’s high home prices and low inventory. “There is a labor gap,” Richer said. “I mostly work in Boston, and the amount of people coming into vocational schools is slowing down. I find there is a lack of info going to middle school students.”

There is also [often a stigma](#) about going to a vocational school.

“It is considered a second choice, second-class,” Patricia Hsieh, president of San Diego Miramar College [told Inside Higher Ed last spring](#). “We really need to change how people see vocational and technical education.”

Benjamin Franklin officials say the institute’s student body for the 2017-2018 school year is 70 percent diverse and that its female student population is growing each year; right now it is 12.6 percent.

There is more good news.

IBEW Local 103 and developer MP Boston held a campaign to boost applications to the union’s 2018 apprentice program. This year they received 687 applications from Boston residents, a 95 percent increase over last year, they said. Of those, 452 were minority applicants and 85 were women — 57 were women of color.