

The Construction Talent Pipeline Gets Expanded At Harvard Business School

February 20, 2018 Cameron Sperance, Bisnow Boston

Boston's building boom has zapped the available construction workforce and sent costs skyrocketing. But a student program at Harvard Business School construction sites could finally replenish the shallow labor pool.

"While employers typically go to colleges and do a five-minute interview at a job fair, they have nine months with a young person on this project," The Compliance Mentor Group President and founder Nicole Richer said. "It's building youth relationships, and it's employers thinking, 'Oh, this could be a talent pipeline for me.'"

Billions of dollars are getting poured into construction projects across the city, but finding workers for the sites is increasingly difficult. The percentage of unfilled jobs in construction is at a 15-year high, according to the [National Association of Home Builders](#). The rising shortage made Richer realize there was a need to close the gap with younger talent.

TCMG's Construction Mentor Program is in its sixth year. The program strives to close the labor gap through a three-phase program at [Harvard Business School](#) construction sites overseen by [Walsh Brothers](#). Students at the Boston-based Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology and Madison Park Technical Vocational High School apply and, if selected, go through foundational learning and job shadowing before getting paired with the trade of their interest.

"Harvard Business School is proud to partner with the Compliance Mentor Group on its efforts to expose local high school student's [to the] construction business," Harvard Business School Chief of Operations Andrew O'Brien wrote in an email. "This direct engagement is a valuable and effective way to get these young students engaged and excited about the possibility of a career in construction. CMG provides a mix of practical and soft skills training that helps create the well-rounded construction workers we need for the future."

Students selected must have a strong academic record and show aptitude in construction as well as an ability to benefit from the program, as it is a full-day commitment that starts at 6:30 a.m. once each month. The program has worked at a variety of HBS projects, including the \$100M [Tata Hall](#). This year's project is the 90K SF, \$171M Klarman Hall. The building will feature a 1,000-seat auditorium and conference space when completed in late 2018.

"Mentees witness first-hand the monumental level of coordination that is necessary between a variety of stakeholders and contractors in order to complete an extremely complex project on-time and within budget," BFIT Director of Career Services and Industry Partnerships Emily Leopold said in a prepared statement.

Successful mentees also land jobs. [Callahan Construction Managers](#) Project Engineer Christopher Hanson said he got his job in part from the recommendation he got from the [Walsh Brothers](#) project manager he worked with while in the CMP last year. While he was familiar with residential construction after working under his father, a carpenter, Hanson points to his time at Harvard as a mentee as getting him ready for more commercial work.

“It helped me network and become more professional and reliable in the business aspect,” Hanson said. “I recognized how serious my role is, and there’s a lot on the table. It’s not just showing up with your hammer and being ready to work. It’s a different type of management team. It’s [Harvard Business School](#).”

Despite the program’s tenure and mentee success, there is work to be done. Noah Schneider, a BFIT student and CMP mentee, said there was not a lot of teacher or guidance counselor outreach while he was in high school to pursue a trade in lieu of college.

He tried a four-year degree before dropping out to pursue the construction work he had always had more of a passion for. Schneider will graduate later this year from BFIT with a certificate in practical electricity.

“At no point was it brought up to go to a trade,” Schneider said. “I think if, at any point, someone had told me to take a vocational class, I could have saved so much time. It’s not that you shouldn’t go to school, but if certain academics are the part of school you’re having trouble with, find something where you can work with your hands.”

While Richer said BFIT has a pipeline through vocational high schools, work needs to be done to expand the pipeline into other education programs. Boston Public Schools eliminated its industrial arts program, limiting exposure to middle school students, she said.

“It’s really in those formative years when you find out what you’re best at and can select your high school based off your interest,” she said.

Because the school system does not have the money to fund the gap, Richer points to developer and construction collaborations like her program as to how the industry finds a solution to its labor shortage problem.

“You can’t put it on one entity,” she said. “It’s a lot of nurturing and relationship-building. To have that exposure provides a place for them so they’re not jobless after high school.”