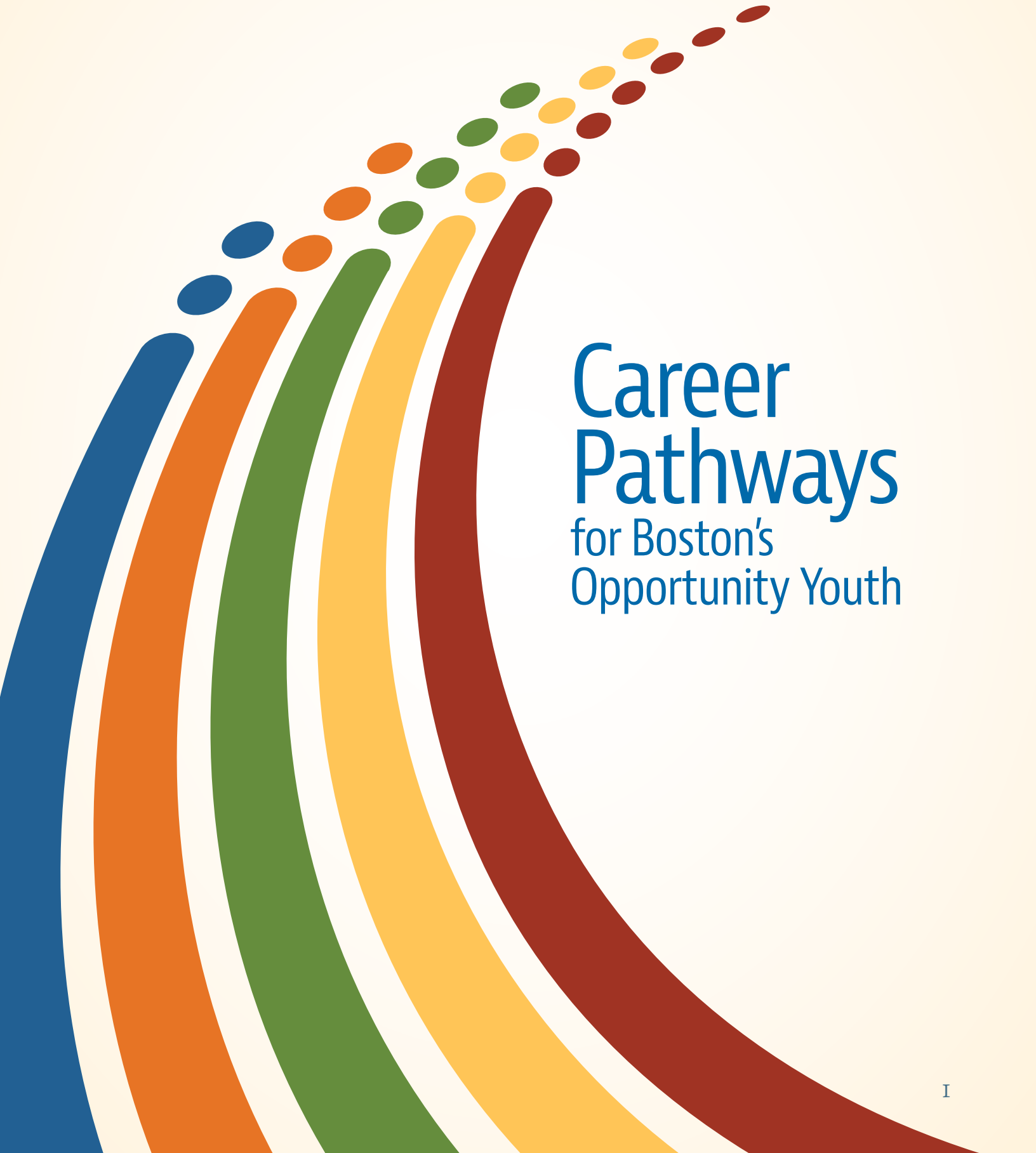




Career Pathways

for Boston's
Opportunity Youth



Research conducted and produced by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

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Photo Credit: Romana Vysatova and College Bound Dorchester

Introduction

The phrase “college and career readiness” is probably one of the most frequently used terms in discussions of education policy and practice. Underlying this term is the assumption that students should be prepared to move from K-12 directly into postsecondary college and/or career options, and that they have built both the academic and non-academic competencies to succeed.

But for too many young people, the reality is that the transition to college or career is not smooth. Many young people—including those who have received a high school degree as well as those who left school prior to earning a degree—find themselves disconnected from both education and employment. This population of young people has been dubbed “opportunity youth” (OY), reflecting their great (and often untapped) promise and potential.

As a follow-up to a 2017 report on college success for opportunity youth,^A researchers at the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy set out to explore the issue of career pathways for OY. We wanted to learn about the topic from two perspectives: first, from young people themselves, and second, from leaders in OY-serving organizations.

In order to gain a holistic picture of the needs and interests of OY when it comes to career pathways, we knew it was critical to speak directly with young people. What are their interests and goals when it comes to choosing a career? What strategies do they use to set themselves on a pathway to a career? What challenges do they face along the way, and what resources can

 School doesn't prepare you for no career. It prepares you to become the teacher.

Youth focus group participant

A Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (June 2017). Opportunity Youth: College Success. Boston, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy.

Defining the OY population

The term “opportunity youth” is often used to refer to young people aged 16-24 who are neither in school nor employed. The term may be expanded to include youth who are “insufficiently attached” to school or employment to capture a fuller range of circumstances, such as young people technically enrolled in school but with a poor record of attendance and academic progress.¹ For the purposes of this report, we focus on needs and barriers common to a broad range of youth who find themselves insufficiently connected to institutions and support systems necessary to achieve long-term postsecondary and life success.

According to the 2017 American Community Survey, the percentage of OY within the youth population of Boston was 4.3%. This represents a decline from the peak of 9.6% in 2009-11, showing that more youth are participating in school and/or employment than in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession. While this is a positive trend, 4.3% of youth still translates to nearly 5,000 young people, most of whom have already earned a high school credential.

Disconnection rates for Black and Latino youth in Boston are higher than for White and Asian youth, with 9.8% of Black and 7.1% of Latino youth experiencing disconnection compared to just 1.5% of White and 0.5% of Asian youth.²

Opportunity youth are more likely than their peers to have been raised in or near poverty, and they are more likely to be English language learners, high school dropouts, court-involved, and homeless or in foster care. Nationally, as in Boston, OY are largely non-white and have diverse cultural experiences.³

they access to overcome these challenges? Because they are, by definition, disconnected from school and employment, it is rare for OY to have the chance to engage in conversations with leaders or decision-makers in either sector. Their voice—particularly when it comes to the personal circumstances and factors that have influenced their choices—is not generally a part of the discussion when it comes to setting policy and practice around education and workforce development. Moreover, OY often do not share cultural backgrounds with those designing and implementing reforms (see the text box to the left for more on the definition and composition of the OY population). Therefore, differences in perspective can make it difficult for leaders to fully understand the challenges many young people face with engagement and persistence.

Because many OY represent historically marginalized groups, our research engaged OY in documenting disparities in existing career pathways utilizing an equity lens. We sought to uncover factors that contributed to young people’s alienation from school and employment by listening to their individual stories—and then elevating their voices by quoting their words throughout this report.

While the input of young people is critical to describing how they approach the process of seeking a career and how they define career success, understanding the full landscape of career options for OY in Boston requires hearing from those with a more systemic view. For that reason, we also spoke with a range of service providers and other experts in the OY field to get a better sense of the landscape of OY-focused organizations and initiatives in Boston. This allowed us to understand the complicated terrain of services and supports that OY must navigate in order to connect (or reconnect) with educational and career pathways.

The first section below provides a brief overview of the status of OY career pathways in Boston. We then move into a discussion of what we heard in our conversations with youth, before turning to a more detailed examination of the landscape for serving OY. We conclude with a summary of key themes and opportunities for the field, along with a set of guiding questions that stakeholders can use to examine their current practice and plan for the future.



Photo Credit: Romana Vysatova and College Bound Dorchester

What is the status of OY career pathways in Boston?

Boston is nationally regarded in the field of serving opportunity youth, with a diverse ecosystem of nonprofits and public agencies working to address the challenges that young people face. For more than a decade, the city has been home to multiple cross-sector initiatives focused on helping young people achieve high school graduation and postsecondary success. This has produced a tradition of collective impact, in which a network of organizations working on similar issues develop a common agenda, use shared systems for tracking progress, engage in aligned activities, and communicate frequently, all with the support of a backbone organization that facilitates these actions.⁴

Boston's history of collective impact continued with the formation of the Opportunity Youth Collaborative (OYC) in 2013. This group, funded by a grant from the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund, engaged in a series of public events and meetings intended to raise awareness of the OY population in Boston and coordinate efforts across existing providers.⁵ Participants included a number of young people as well as representatives from local government, institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, and research institutions.

While it tapped into a rich history of collective impact within the city, the OYC also drew from a wide range of local service providers offering career preparation programs for youth. The wealth of local options for serving OY is illustrated in a recent report highlighting the OYC's work. A list of the destination programs for clients of Boston's Connection Center (an outgrowth of the OYC that worked to connect youth with education and career pathways) mentions 21 training programs, including ones that prepare participants for careers in banking and finance, nursing, culinary arts, construction, and coding.⁶

Despite a supportive local ecosystem characterized by cross-sector partnerships, Boston continues to face a large skills gap, or the difference between the demand for a set of skills and the supply of skilled workers. According to the most recent LinkedIn workforce report, Boston faces the fourth-largest skills gap of any city nationwide, with particular need for skills in oral communication, leadership, and digital literacy.⁷ Additionally, a 2016 report by the Commonwealth Corporation notes that businesses across Massachusetts consistently cite “soft skills” such as initiative and dependability as the most important needs for new and emerging workers.⁸

Although local employers search for workers with the right mix of skills to fill job openings, young people nationwide are largely relegated to industries “characterized by part-time jobs, unpredictable schedules, low wages, high turnover, and limited opportunities for advancement,” according to the Aspen Institute.⁹ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics notes that the industries employing the largest numbers of youth and young adults include food service and retail, which often feature the hurdles to career growth described above.¹⁰ And Massachusetts continues to see disproportionate unemployment among workers with a high school diploma or less and among younger workers 16-24 years of age. For instance, the latter group makes up 34% of the labor force, but 47% of the unemployed.¹¹

Add up all these factors, and it becomes clear that despite the rich environment of OY-serving organizations, young people in Boston often struggle to access career opportunities. While individual organizations may excel at supporting youth in their programs, and the OYC represents an effort to coordinate this work, there is no comprehensive support system that helps young people move from program to program, even though their needs are often multifaceted and evolving. In this way, even youth who connect with an individual program may have difficulty accessing a career pathway that leads to long-term success.

While there is no single definition of a “pathway”—or its required components—in the field of opportunity youth, there is a shared understanding that pathways for this population should consist of a portfolio of options that can help young people enroll in a postsecondary education or training that leads to meaningful credentials with value in the labor market, and ultimately enter a career that offers a family-sustaining wage. These options should have multiple on-ramps and off-ramps (that is, opportunities to start, pause, and reengage) in order to meet young people’s needs and respond to their assets, skills, and challenges. Pathways may engage any or all of the institutions that comprise the landscape for OY support in Boston, from schools and community-based programs to government agencies and employers.

Following a discussion of our methodology for engaging OY, we dive into what we learned from young people about what they’re looking for in a career pathway—and how the current options are or are not meeting their needs.

METHODOLOGY

How did we engage with opportunity youth?

To gain a deeper understanding of the options for opportunity youth within Boston, the Rennie Center conducted a series of landscape interviews with service providers and other leaders in the field (see Appendix A for a list of the organizations we interviewed). Having laid the groundwork, we then moved into the other main part of our research: discussions with youth about their experiences and interests regarding career pathways. By bringing young people to the forefront of the conversation, we hoped to: 1) acknowledge the diversity of lived experiences among local youth, and 2) empower youth to reflect and participate in conversations/decision-making about their career opportunities.¹² That is, we sought not only to deepen our own insights but also to spark critical reflection among the young people themselves.

The Rennie Center team conducted a series of focus groups with youth to gain insight into the lived educational experiences and career opportunities available across the city. These focus groups were carried out with the support of the Youth Voice Project, which is composed of trained youth leaders who reach out to OY and advise the Opportunity Youth Collaborative. To ensure an authentic and supportive environment, the focus group conversations were facilitated and led by a member of the Youth Voice Project.

Our main method of identifying participants was engaging with local programs (community groups and/or employers) serving OY. The program leads identified a group of young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who had formerly experienced disconnection from school and/or employment. These young people came from a range of backgrounds: some had earned high school diplomas or high school equivalency credentials, while others had not; many also had prior experience with college and employment. However, this group is not strictly representative of the OY population because all were engaged in community-based training programs that aim to prepare them for a career pathway.

Speaking with OY disconnected from any programming would be nearly impossible, given the challenges of identifying and connecting with these youth. Instead, working with local programs allowed us to speak with dozens of young people who had recently experienced being disconnected from school and employment and could speak from that perspective. We chose to connect with young people in community-based programs—rather than in schools or college campuses—because these programs are truly on the front lines of recruiting and engaging OY in career preparation.

In all, we convened 10 focus groups (including one held at Northeastern Crossing for OY unaffiliated with a particular program), reaching a total of 61 young people. See Appendix A for a full list of programs where we conducted focus groups.

For each focus group, we developed and used a pre-planned protocol that included questions as well as a variety of activities to spur thought and discussion. For instance, we used the following activities in some of the focus groups:

- **Group mapping:** Young people were asked to individually complete a career map showing the skills they need to acquire, the barriers they face, and action steps they could take to access their chosen career. They then discussed the maps with a partner, talking about the resources they might need to tackle any obstacles.
- **Word association:** Young people were asked to provide the first word that came to mind after each prompt (high school, college, internship, dream, opportunity, money, career, and future). After each round, there was time for discussion to expand on their selected word.
- **Build-a-Program:** With a partner, young people were asked to reflect on their life experiences with education, jobs, and future opportunities. They then had the chance to design a program that would support young people in determining their career of choice, including support services, job training, college credit, etc.

Appendix B includes samples of activities we used as part of focus group discussions. Once we had concluded all of these discussions, we analyzed all data—including materials produced during each of the activities as well as responses to our question prompts—to develop the conclusions and recommendations below. Our final step was to reach out to employers to find out how this information could be most useful as they thought through future plans to expand outreach and engagement with OY.



Source: Youth focus groups, word association for "career".

What did we hear from young people about career pathways?

In all our focus groups, we found that young people were eager to share their stories and offer candid insights on all aspects of their educational and employment history. Their comments centered on two main aspects of a career pathway: career exploration and educational experiences. The sections below dive deeper into these areas, then examine key findings from young people on engaging with employers.

In all cases, we draw heavily from the words of young people themselves to highlight important themes. It is important to note that these are not intended to serve as an objective or impartial analysis of the institutions they are discussing. Many of the quotes reflect the speaker's frustration with difficult experiences they have had in school and on the job. By using a Peer Leader from the Youth Voice Project to facilitate the conversations, we strove to engage youth in conversations that they may not be comfortable having around adult decision-makers, leading to honest—if often pointed—insights that we hope can inform future work in the field.

We start by describing the limited opportunities for young people to engage in career exploration. For many OY, not having a clear sense of their future aspirations is both a cause and a symptom of their disconnection from school and work. Therefore, understanding the lack of career exploration is key to understanding young people's comments about their experiences in school and work.

VOICES ON Career Exploration

Career exploration consists of two main components: first, having opportunities to discover and think through your own interests and aptitudes as well as potential careers that align with those; and second, learning more about a particular career through a structured learning experience, such as a program placement or an internship. Both elements offer young people the chance to see whether a particular career is a good fit for them before committing to a (potentially expensive or time-consuming) training program.

In our conversations with young people, it became clear that career exploration is a privilege often unavailable to opportunity youth. Many OY do not have access to role models—particularly those who come from a similar cultural background—who have attained stable careers and can speak about how they got there. Therefore, OY tend to have fewer opportunities to learn about career options than young people growing up in families or neighborhoods where they regularly come into contact with individuals working in a variety of fields.

Moreover, the educational institutions that could help fill this gap rarely offer opportunities for students to learn about potential career interests and aptitudes. Many of the youth we spoke with did not have access to any career exploration activities within their schools, either during the day or in after-school hours. Colleges also offer limited opportunities to learn about or experience different career options. And while most of the OY we spoke to were connected with career-focused training programs (since these programs hosted our focus groups), young people did not necessarily come to these programs because they had a long-term interest in the field. Indeed, many participants were attending those programs because they simply needed a space to gain skills that would help them secure stable employment, some adult coaching for their future goals, or an on-ramp into college, rather than because of a long-term passion for the industry. This ad hoc approach to skill-building contrasts with the carefully cultivated resumes and deliberate career-focused activities often found among more affluent and well-connected youth, but there are few resources available to OY that offer an equitable opportunity for career exploration and understanding.

Finally, when it comes to preparing for a career, focus group participants frequently recognized the importance of internships and real-world work experiences, but they did not see an unpaid internship as a viable option (particularly when combined with college and/or paid employment). Without these traditional options for exploring available careers, many young people struggle to find entry points to careers that engage them and utilize their skills.

UNDERSTANDING CAREER OPTIONS

At a baseline level, many of the young people we spoke with felt completely unprepared to enter a career pathway—or even define their career interests—coming out of high school:

- *I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't understand what I was passionate about.*
- *There is an expectation to know what you want right out of high school but nothing to help navigate that.*

Some young people spoke passionately about the need for career exploration to begin in the early grades, not just to expose students to a range of options, but also to help them avoid making poor decisions by giving them a sense of purpose and direction:

- *We need careers to save these kids earlier. After school hours, [give them] more work, build a career.*
- *I think coming out of elementary school is the perfect time to set up programs for kids, so they can figure out what they want to do as a career....Catch them before they make a mistake.*

When describing their desired career paths, the younger teens we talked to (those between ages 14 and 17) tended to focus on appealing careers they had seen or heard about: for instance, when asked how they know what they want to do, one student responded, “I heard lawyers make a lot of money.” Another commented, “I like the police academy...but I want to be top dog.”

Among older cohorts of youth, however, their ability to be successful in a particular job became a more prominent component of their interest in that career path, leading them to draw clearer distinctions between dream careers and the reality of their current career path. For instance, one young person noted, “I am good at taking care of people. I love taking care of old people, and I am good at it from taking care of my grandmother, but my dream job is to be a hairdresser.”

 I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't understand what I was passionate about.

In many cases, young people judged their likelihood of success based on their prior experiences working in that or a similar field, meaning that their career aspirations often built upon activities they knew, enjoyed, and could envision themselves engaging in long-term:

-  *I worked at a gym and they had a daycare where I worked with kids. There is where I learned that I liked working with kids, with different age ranges, seeing how they interact with each other.*
-  *I like to learn while I'm doing. I like to be hands-on...When I was doing solar boards [i.e., installing solar panels], I was up there and doing something I felt was important.*
-  *[While working as an English tutor], I would analyze texts and ask questions about what [students] wanted. Once you talk to these kids the right way, they will open up more. If I were to get an art therapy degree I would help young adults.*

In other cases, young people expressed interest in entrepreneurial pathways and activities. For some, the drive to become an entrepreneur and rely on themselves for their own career path reflected a hesitation to rely on others, as with the young person who stated, “People don’t reach out to others. Everything you do, you’ve got to...elevate yourself, start by believing in yourself. Right now, I’m building my own following in music.” For others, “entrepreneurial” ambitions seemed to mean that young people didn’t know what they wanted to do and weren’t able to envision themselves following a standard career path.

Ultimately, as with many other young people, OY tend to seek careers at the intersection of work they enjoy and work where they believe they can succeed. But with few opportunities to learn about roles they may enjoy, and to understand what is required to succeed in these roles, the available pool of career options is very limited—as is the ability to take dedicated steps toward a career pathway. This points to the need to build young people’s understanding of available options, and to offer rich experiential learning opportunities where they can get a taste of success before committing to a particular pathway.

ACCESSING CAREER EXPERIENCES

In our discussions with young people, most of whom faced significant detours in their own path through the educational system, a connection with a local OY-serving program became an important source of career preparation. Yet many young people learned about available programming via word of mouth or personal recommendations, not because they had expressed an interest in a particular field and been targeted through recruitment and outreach efforts:

-  *I got into this program because a girl I worked with did this and got a certificate.*
-  *It's a fast lane [to participate in a program] when you know people and they trust the process.*
-  *I found this because my mom knew someone who worked here.*
-  *My probation officer told me [about this program].*

In fact, a number of comments made clear that participation in a given program was a means to an end, rather than a commitment to a career pathway:

-  *I don't necessarily want to be in the healthcare world but I was good at it, and it is helping me pay for school. My dream job would be to open a restaurant.*
-  *This is my short-term career, so I can pay off loans, go back to community college, and do art education and psychology.*

As these reflections demonstrate, recommendations from friends or family tended to count for more than the subject matter when young people made a decision about connecting (or reconnecting) with a career-training program. The critical importance of personal connections also came up as young people discussed the challenges of accessing pre-career experiences such as internships. Many youth simultaneously recognized the need for such connections and reflected on the difficulty of accessing opportunities without a deep professional network:

-  *Connections are everything.*
-  *It's hard to get something unless you know someone.*
-  *I need to know the right people, and that's how I will [get a job].*
-  *It takes interpersonal skills to go in and cold call and ask [about internships]. You are working unpaid for x amount of time and spend hours in a day to do that.*

But even having the necessary connections—for example, through a college or community program—cannot overcome the hard financial reality that internships are often not realistic options for most opportunity youth. As one young person stated, “Full-time unpaid internships—not feasible.” This is especially true for students who are supporting themselves or their families and need to engage in paid employment in order to pay the bills. In this way, a powerful method of career exploration—and a rich source of job experience and professional connections—is largely unavailable to opportunity youth.

Our conversations with youth went into great detail about how participants learned (or did not learn) about career options and experiences. But what about the education system and its focus on college and career readiness? How did their secondary and postsecondary education help prepare young people to enter the workforce? The next section highlights some of the key trends on these topics.

Educational Experiences

Although the focus group discussions were structured to explore the nuances of career pathways, it is perhaps inevitable that a substantial portion of the conversation centered on young people's attitudes toward schooling. After all, school experiences have the potential to shape students' attitudes toward their own career interests and ambitions and expose them to new topics and fields. Ideally, school would also offer opportunities for students to engage in career exploration, understand their own strengths and areas for growth, and learn about options for postsecondary career training—although (as described above) those elements were largely unavailable to the young people in our focus groups.

Youth attitudes toward education were complex and deeply informed by their own experiences in high school, higher education, and (occasionally) alternative educational settings. One clear theme, though, was that most young people didn't feel that their high school experiences set them on the path toward a career. They did not have access to opportunities to explore career options or clarify their own interests and ambitions. Additionally, their schools tended to focus largely (or exclusively) on college as a postsecondary pathway, leaving students to see college as the only option. Meanwhile, young people who attended college found that they received insufficient support to navigate the complex and impersonal system of higher education. Without seeing the links between college coursework and access to a career, and with a keen sense of the cost of tuition, most of the OY we spoke with viewed college as an obstacle—or worse, a dead end.

HIGH SCHOOL

Most young people we spoke with were critical of their high school experiences. A number of general comments reflected frustration that school did not meet their needs when it came to preparing for life after graduation:

-  *High school failed me. I don't think I learned anything in high school.*
-  *I sat patiently and allowed people to waste 12 years of my time. I don't have that patience anymore.*
-  *I was bright, but I couldn't do high school. I couldn't sit through a class.*

More specifically, many youth talked about how school failed to prepare students with “real-world” skills that they could use to navigate the world of college or careers. Their comments highlight a number of particular topics that students wish they had learned more about while in school:

-  *High school doesn't teach you about taxes, credit, mortgages. They don't prepare you for the real world.*
-  *They don't talk about what is going in the real world. History class isn't teaching you about the Congress and voting.*
-  *They don't teach you how to deal with things that you are not used to, like health insurance.*
-  *High school treats you like a child. Why not prepare me for what I need to do? Taxes, a resume, properly owning a car? Why I shouldn't have a loan for \$200,000? Scholarships? High school isn't teaching you the right content, at the right time, or in the right format.*

Another topic mentioned in the same category was conflict resolution, particularly how to handle tense situations in the workplace and conflicts with a manager.

Beyond the lack of adequate preparation for a complex world, another theme in the comments about high school focused on the challenge of connecting with adults within the building. Youth found it difficult to identify teachers who motivated them to excel or adults they could go to for support and advice when confronting questions about postsecondary plans:

-  *I didn't have a role model (teacher, principal, guidance counselor), someone to sit with and talk about myself.*

 *I needed to know my teachers. I didn't have real conversations in high school.*

 *You come into classes and the teachers are expecting everyone to fail.*

One bright spot, however, was the value of alternative educational environments, both for helping students build useful skills and for the way adults in those settings cared about students. Several particular schools and programs were called out by name during the conversations for their positive effects:

 *Alt Ed got to know you.*

 *BDEA [the Boston Day and Evening Academy]...they make sure that you have a general idea of what you want to do so that you are not stranded while you try to figure it out. They help out with more practical skills.*

 *At X-Cel Education they do [help students prepare for the workplace]. They have volunteers, like three in a class, that can help students and offer individualized support. They help you get placed in a job after you graduate.*

HIGHER EDUCATION

Again and again, we heard a similar refrain from the young people in our focus groups, even from students who expressed frustration about high school—"I have to go to college." Youth viewed college as a way to deepen their understanding of the world and of a particular field, as a pathway to a more fulfilling career, or both. Their comments make clear that many students hold a deeply ingrained assumption that college is the end goal of their education:

 *I have to go to college to learn more about what I want to do.*

 *You have to go to college to get a better understanding of what is going on. In this nursing program, you need to go to a school, there is a lot of stuff to know.*

 *Everything is driving to college, it is all for college.*

 **Everything is driving to college, it is all for college.**

Running through many of these comments is the notion of the "college push": that outside forces impel young people toward college, regardless of their own career interests or motivations. For instance, one focus group participant told our youth facilitator, "I don't know how I got into college. Everything was so rushed." Many young people feel pushed toward college without understanding its value in helping them attain a career, in part because (as described above) they lack a clear sense of their own career interests and aspirations.

For students who enroll in college because it seems like the only option, but without a clear sense of how it will help them access a career pathway, college can seem like an empty exercise. Meanwhile, the financial burden of a college education weighs heavily. For some youth, high tuition costs made them defer the decision to apply to college in the first place; for those who chose to enroll, the cost of college tended to provoke feelings of anxiety, or even regret:

 *I found it sad that all of my friends were going to college, and you are the only one not going to college. I knew I couldn't go to college, I wasn't going to put my single mother into debt because I don't know what I am going to do.*

 *It's added stress right after school, and you don't get a job, and the bills come in.*

 *College was a scam because it is all this money, loans that take all your life. College professors don't care. You shouldn't have to pay for your education.*

A number of young people reported that their colleges did not provide adequate (or any) support with career experiences or placements, compounding their ambivalent feelings toward higher education:

 *You get a degree, but you are not guaranteed a job. it's a waste of time, but I have a degree under my belt that is supposed to make it better.*

- They don't help you find a job....It is all about jobs and internships, they don't help you with a career. If I am paying for all that—I should have a job.
- There were a lot of internships at my community college, if you want experiences, but you need to find the resources.

Of course, not every young person described a negative experience in college. For instance, one individual shared that college offered useful career support:

- I got what I wanted out of college, I got better at what I wanted to do. The last year of college, I had a teacher who helped us build our portfolio and how to market ourselves. It was applicable and transferrable. It was well-rounded in that sense.*

Despite some positive comments, though, the overwhelming attitude toward higher education was one of worry over the large investment in time and money. Perhaps most revealing were the responses of a group of teens in one focus group. The seven participants ranged in age from 14 to 17, making this the youngest of all the groups we spoke with. When asked what was most exciting about college, their responses—rather than highlighting possibilities or opportunities—evoked an array of concerns:

- It's scary—you're graduating, life hits you, and you need to find that job.*
- It's expensive.*
- You need to be aware to manage yourself, and the bill.*
- Paying loans.*

Perhaps the overall attitude toward higher education is best summed up by the student who commented, “In high school you want to go to college, but when you get there you regret it.”

Along with our discussions of career exploration and educational experiences, we also heard a number of important insights from youth about what it is like to engage directly with employers, both during the interview process and on the job. In the next section, we highlight some of the key trends from these comments, which focus on the end goal of any career pathway: paid employment.



VOICES ON

Engaging with Employers

Youth acknowledged the importance of making a good impression when first meeting with an employer, often in the context of a job interview. This is especially true for youth who have been involved in the criminal justice system (and whose history is available to employers as Criminal Offender Record Information, or a CORI). A number of youth expressed the hope that employers (even those with different cultural backgrounds and lived experiences) could look beyond the CORI when getting to know their skills and interests:

- Learn about me as a person. If you like me, I get a job. Make your own perception of me, don't judge me based on this paper.
- It's not all about business, you need to know who I am....No matter what, I still go in there being me. They need to stop judging.
- Employers need to be more CORI-friendly. [Sometimes] that question of felony becomes the final decider.

Once on the job, young people took it as a given that they would need training in order to complete the required tasks—training that was sometimes, but not always, provided:

- My first job I had a lot of training (in sales and working at the gym). In retail I had no training—it was just counting money.
- I prefer training upfront and then continued support.
- [In one job I gave] surveys over the phone. We were handed a script with no guidance. Questions wouldn't and couldn't be answered...There [was] little to no training.
- [For my role we had] intensive trainings. They were really important and really relevant.

Beyond training, we heard repeatedly from youth about the need for employers to establish a positive working environment in which staff could put forward their best efforts. Sometimes this was framed as the need for “managers with sympathy and empathy” who value their employees and aim to keep them satisfied. More often, though, young people pointed out the challenges of working for bosses who come from a different cultural background and with different lived experiences:

- *People also need to understand your circumstances, what it takes this person to get up, get dressed, come to you safely, get home.*
- *My employer isn't aware of our needs at all, as people....It is really hard to get employers to care, especially with family circumstances.*
- *Employers don't know what employees need. They are horrible to students and need to be updated. They're out of touch with culture and they see change as negative.*
- *I didn't want to work in an office setting, where a majority of the staff were white and fairly affluent. There was a lot of respectability politics. Being one of the very few people of color there you had to switch codes. That's not an environment I want to be in.*

Issues with a lack of cultural competency in the workplace contrasted strongly with the supportive environments youth experienced in career-focused programs. Program staff act as the bridge between OY and employers. They are on the front-line of bringing in previously disconnected young people, identifying their needs and interests, and equipping them with the hard and soft skills needed to succeed in educational or career pathways. All of these efforts need to be built on a foundation of trust, which often starts with the recognition of shared cultures and similar lived experiences:

- *Everyone else is afraid of us, but you want us.*
- *[With] staff that had shared experience, kids can relate to them and learn as they go along.*
- *It is important [the staff] are helping me. I know that everything they told me is genuine, and I know it is positive and love.*
- *We need the tough love. I have been in programs where the staff is too lax...We need accountability, and nurturing. Check in often, and hold us accountable.*

These comments offer a window into what young people are looking for in terms of support, and especially culturally competent support. While it may not be the case that employers personally relate to young people's experiences and situations, they can nevertheless focus on building an environment in which young people from a diversity of backgrounds and cultures feel wanted and appreciated. This focus on cultural responsiveness is beneficial to all employees, not just OY, but it is particularly critical when young people come from different backgrounds than the majority of their coworkers and managers.

In several focus groups, our youth facilitator asked participants to write down responses on to the question, “What should employers know about young people?” Some responses ask employers to confront some of the hurdles that youth may have faced (or continue to face) when it comes to career preparation and success:

- *Employers need to know that young people may not have had opportunities for internships/apprenticeships.*
- *Youth don't have access to learn how to create a resume.*
- *We need the money. Those who need it will work for it. A lot of youth come from poverty.*
- *We real broke out here.*

Others reveal how eager young people are to be seen as individuals whose opinions and experiences have worth:

-  *My time is valuable.*
-  *We evolve.*
-  *We have valuable suggestions.*
-  *We need our voices to be heard.*

 We have valuable suggestions.
We need our voices to be heard.

As these honest and insightful responses attest, young people have a lot to share about their needs and interests when it comes to career pathways, as well as the challenges they face as they seek to move into the workforce. The comments they shared on their educational experiences, career exploration, and employer engagement include a number of compelling takeaways for decision-makers seeking to assist OY with career placements. To start, the challenges facing young people often stem from mismatched expectations between students and the adults or institutions they encounter. During high school and college, the youth we spoke with hoped to access training and preparation that would equip them with life skills, and they often found this content lacking; meanwhile, they discounted the relevance of the academic content schools are charged with providing.

Another common challenge was the disconnect between young people's knowledge of their college or career goals and the resources they had available to achieve them. This certainly came up in the context of college, which most saw as the natural endpoint of education, even as they expressed dismay about how to pay for it. It also arose, though, when students discussed the importance of networks for accessing career experiences. And while many young people understood the value that internships could offer as a form of career preparation, they saw them as non-viable options given the pressing need to earn a wage.

While it is critical to highlight these challenges in order to point toward a way forward, it is also necessary to acknowledge the tremendous strengths among the OY we spoke with. In our conversations, we encountered deeply motivated young people determined to succeed (though it must be acknowledged that all the youth we interviewed had chosen to participate in a career training program, leading to some selection bias within our discussions). Some noted deeply personal reasons for working toward a more secure career path: "My 'why,' it is my son." "I am trying to be an example to my friends and siblings." But across all our focus groups, we heard from young people who were striving for improvement and growth in multiple areas of life: personal, academic, financial, and professional.

We also heard from individuals who were astute at evaluating both their individual challenges and the systemic barriers they face. Youth were clear-eyed about their past actions (including misdeeds) and the repercussions they have had, even as they called out the systemic injustices they have faced. For instance, one student relayed a story about how she paid for her first semester of college tuition by credit card—and then was fired from an internship at a financial institution because of her poor credit rating. The young person did not tell this story to blame herself or attack her employer, but to highlight the need for better financial literacy and college counseling in high school.

The input of young people offers a valuable lens into their interests and needs. However, one area that they did not comment on also directly affects how they experience career pathways: how service providers (like the ones hosting our focus groups) respond to the needs of youth. The ways that providers partner with employers, and with each other, help shape the availability of opportunities for OY, even if they are largely unaware of these dynamics. The next section, therefore, examines how service providers and employers interact to help young people access meaningful career experiences—and areas where more work is needed to produce integrated career pathways.

What is the landscape for OY career pathways?

While the perspective of young people is critical—and too often overlooked—in discussions of career opportunities for opportunity youth, it is also important to examine the broader landscape in which career pathways are formed. The dynamics of this landscape help illuminate some of the challenges that young people face in accessing and persisting in career pathways, especially where internal pressures or external incentives contribute to the conditions that young people experience. The following section describes the landscape for OY career programming, focusing particularly on two key groups: service providers and employers. After that, the report brings together key themes heard from young people with information on the state of the field to explore how to develop effective career pathways for OY.

LANDSCAPE OF Service Providers

Young people disconnected from education and employment rarely have access to career opportunities that offer family-sustaining wages without assistance from an intermediary. OY benefit from additional support to clarify the landscape of potential career paths, make introductions to employers, and build their self-confidence and job-readiness skills (see the text box for a partial list of the skills that youth reported developing through career-preparation programs).

In some cases, young people may choose to work toward a career by reengaging in school or college;^B in other cases, they may rely on connections and skills they develop through part-time or temporary employment. Often, though, as they seek to develop their career understanding, network, and preparation, young people turn to service providers—that is, community-based organizations whose mission is to connect underserved populations with opportunities for advancement.

Service providers form a vital part of the service-delivery pipeline for OY and other vulnerable populations, particularly when it comes to filling in gaps that public-sector initiatives and supports do not address. By maintaining close connections with youth (often, youth from a particular geographic or cultural community), they are able to recognize and respond to the needs of that community. Many organizations focus on recruiting staff whose cultural backgrounds and lived experiences are similar to the young people they serve; this helps young people build relationships with trusted adults who can serve as role models for overcoming obstacles and accessing a stable career. Moreover, service providers serve as a bridge to college and careers, offering exposure to the world of work in a controlled setting—and with an empathetic approach to personal development that may not be found in a business environment. In this way, they offer OY a training ground where they can build workplace-ready skills and competencies before engaging directly with employers.

One of the primary needs for any service provider is recruiting participants. Because OY are, by definition, only marginally connected to education and employment, providers cannot rely exclusively on schools or employers to point them toward young people who would benefit from their services. Instead, when recruiting youth, providers benefit from establishing multiple on-ramps and thinking creatively about how to engage community members in the recruitment process. For example,

Skills

What skills have you been able to build through this program?

- Time management
- Code switching
- Feedback
- Email etiquette
- Communication
- Task initiation
- Life skills. Resumes, etc.
- Difference between outside behavior and work behavior

B. For more on the ways that colleges can support opportunity youth, particularly when it comes to career services, see the Rennie Center report “Opportunity Youth: College Success,” available at renniecenter.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/OpportunityYouthCollege.pdf.

talking to young people and their family members in local shops, religious institutions, and transit hubs can help spread the word about available options. Throughout this process, service providers must explicitly grapple with questions of equity, particularly racial equity, as they plan how to reach their target populations and address both formal and informal barriers to entry for the most vulnerable or marginalized youth, such as those involved in the criminal justice system. Ramping up entry requirements may support more efficient service delivery, but it also runs the risk of excluding those most in need of services. And programs that define specific start and end dates (instead of offering rolling admission) may alienate young people who are looking to engage right away.

Post-recruitment, service providers are charged with meeting an array of needs in order to keep young people on a pathway to career success. Of course, service providers cannot address all these needs by themselves. Instead, staff aim to leverage the ecosystem of providers around them by building three types of connections: first, partnerships with other community-based organizations; second, partnerships with outside agencies and institutions that offer wraparound support and expertise in areas ranging from mental health to child care to transportation; and third, partnerships with employers that offer real-world training and transitions into career opportunities.



Photo Credit: Romana Vysatova and College Bound Dorchester

PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS

Building and maintaining strong relationships with other service providers will help young people find a program that best fits their needs. As we heard from the OY we spoke with, young people tend to connect with a particular service provider through personal connections—namely, friends or family members who refer them to that organization. They rarely “shop around” (or are recruited) for programs that will fit their schedule, interests, or goals. Therefore, it is not uncommon for OY to engage with a program, only to find that it’s not the best option for them. This type of misalignment also exacerbates the ever-present challenge of encouraging youth to stick with a program after the first engagement.

When a service provider finds that a young person may be better served by seeking a different pathway, ideally the organization would be able to refer that young person to another provider and offer a “warm hand-off” that enables a seamless transition between programs. In practice, though, there are major obstacles to this process. Staff may not be aware of all the options available and which other providers might best meet the needs of youth. The OY field lacks a comprehensive platform or guide to help staff navigate the various options and identify promising programs with

particular characteristics. To be most useful, such a guide would need to describe not only the programmatic focus and model, but also any prerequisites for participation and target populations. In the absence of such a resource, staff often rely on their personal knowledge and connections to other organizations—but given the high staff turnover within many service providers, these personal connections are liable to shift over time, limiting the institutional knowledge within organizations and the efficacy of staff training or professional development.

It is also difficult to share information on young people across programs. The data that programs collect is often not aligned, and privacy concerns also add to the challenge of transferring records from one service provider to another. This means that staff don't benefit from knowing the history of a young person, while young people themselves have difficulty building and maintaining a record of their past accomplishments.

Rather than coming in with a portfolio that demonstrates the skills and competencies they have already built and those they have yet to develop, youth starting in a new program tend to come in with little pre-existing evidence of their goals, successes, and challenges.

Perhaps the most insidious obstacle, however, goes to the heart of how service providers operate. These organizations tend to rely on philanthropic support, and securing support from funders tends to require defining and measuring success. Having young people complete the training and attain a career placement is often central to that definition of success. Enabling easier transitions across programs can make outcomes look less impressive—a young person who transfers to seek a different training opportunity is one less program completer, one less “success story” that the service provider can use to seek future funding. Therefore, many providers see retaining youth as critical to the survival of their organization. Service providers judged based on completion and placement rates have little incentive to build strong, lasting pathways across programs, not to mention limited leverage to promote a shared model of success that places youth outcomes (rather than programmatic outcomes) at the center. To date, funders have made limited investments building an infrastructure that promotes—rather than stigmatizes—effective hand-offs between providers.



This is my short-term career, so I can pay off loans, go back to community college, and do art education and psychology.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH WRAPAROUND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Service providers recognize the array of needs that young people carry with them, which demand a holistic approach to career preparation and support. The practitioners we spoke with listed just some of the issues that may require attention: behavioral or mental health services to address the effects of trauma, assistance with transportation and housing, financial literacy, help with navigating state systems in order to receive food stamps and other public benefits, and two-generation approaches that support young people as well as their children (or adult dependents). For OY lacking a financial safety net, unforeseen challenges (for example, with health, housing, or child care) tend to affect their ability to stay engaged with educational or training programs. Therefore, providers place a high value on proactive planning and rapid response, helping young people seek support before any challenge becomes too big to handle.



I am trying to be an example to my friends and siblings.

Many service providers aim to incorporate some elements of wraparound supports in their operating structure and budget. For example, programs may have a stock of MBTA passes available that students can use to get to and from the site, minimizing challenges with paying for transportation. At the same time, no single provider can meet all needs in-

house, so service providers benefit from building connections with external agencies and other organizations. At a basic level, they can share a list of resources with youth in need of support (e.g., a list of food pantries or health clinics in the area). Service providers can also go further by making referrals to other agencies or engaging directly with those agencies to advocate for a young person. As with collaboration across programs, however, one of the main obstacles to building strong partnerships with wraparound service providers is staff turnover. When (as is most often the case) there are personal or individual connections between providers rather than structured, formal partnerships, the connections are liable to be weakened when employees leave.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

Our conversations with youth highlighted the need for career pathways that allow young people to explore their interests and experience success in a real-world environment, and service providers use a range of models and approaches for engaging with employers. These provide diverse means of responding to both employers' needs and youth workforce readiness, while also illustrating a number of effective strategies for service providers seeking to connect young people with career pathways. Examples of four program models are provided below.

First, several local providers are not only service and training programs, but also employers in their own right. For instance, the Education and Training Institute at the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center hosts career-focused programming for current and future health center employees, including through a program that trains youth to become Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs). As they participate in coursework and learn about the CNA role, participants also have access to training opportunities within the health center. This type of program can provide a seamless transition from training to certification and employment, ensure that participants are able to apply their skills, and offer a deeper understanding of what it means to work in healthcare.

Of course, an integrated approach where the service provider is also the employer is not available at every site or in every field (nor do all youth seek out this sort of intensive and focused preparation). A second set of service providers aim to build young people's workforce readiness skills and expand their networks, thereby helping support entry into a variety of industries. For example, the youth employment program at the Asian American Civic Association, called Hire Values, helps OY obtain part- or full-time employment and explore college and job training opportunities. Hire Values participants receive support with writing cover letters and resumes, preparing for job interviews, and connecting with internship and job placements, along with longer-term career counseling and case management. The types of services available through AACA offer critical starting points and confidence-builders for OY looking to reconnect with employment but unsure of how to begin.

A third group of providers not only plays a central connecting role between youth and employers but also offers support and training to both groups. One such organization is Sociedad Latina. It offers multiple career programming strands for young people: a Work Readiness Curriculum that integrates monthly career exploration activities and culminates in an internship with an employer partner, and a 10-week program entitled ¡emprende! that allows youth to explore the field of entrepreneurship by developing and pitching a business venture. But the organization also works directly with local employers to prepare them to work with young people from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. In this way, the organization leverages its insight in the field of OY and its ability to effectively communicate with both young people and employers to lay the groundwork for a more successful (and culturally competent) workplace experience.

A fourth model is for a provider to establish formalized, recurring partnerships with local employers, creating a dedicated pipeline for career-seeking OY. The primary example of this model is Year Up, which offers a one-year training program in which participants build job skills, enroll in college coursework, and undertake a corporate internship while receiving comprehensive, wraparound support from staff. To solidify the commitment and collaboration of local employers, Year

Up maintains a Memorandum of Understanding with each employer partner that includes a financial commitment by the partner. Year Up has positioned itself as a talent pipeline for top employers in Boston looking to recruit OY, and its operating structure demonstrates the value of establishing consistent and sustainable partnerships with employers; of course, it is worth noting that developing these types of well-funded career pathways may prove challenging for service providers with fewer upfront resources and less access to employer partners.

LANDSCAPE OF Employers

Along with service providers, employers are a critical part of the process of building career pathways for OY and supporting youth along these pathways. They can offer “structured work try-outs,” as one interviewee put it. While service providers can help young people build career-ready skills, the best way to refine those skills is to put them into practice, preferably in a low-stakes environment where young people can make mistakes and learn from them. This requires the collaboration of employers to offer internships, apprenticeships, and other short-term opportunities where OY can experience the realities of the workplace. They can also help service providers refine their training models and related supports by clarifying their immediate and future workforce needs. That is, employers can speak to the demand side of the career pipeline, helping providers supply employees who meet those needs.

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—employers can make jobs available to a young person who successfully completes a career training program. Too often, OY “get the training but are not getting the jobs,” according to one leader in the field; employers can mitigate the risk that young people who have successfully navigated a training program will disengage when an appropriate job opportunity fails to materialize. Of course, hiring OY can also help employers fill needed roles, enhance the diversity of their workforce, and promote economic development within their communities.



There were a lot of internships at my community college, if you want experiences, but you need to find the resources.

Despite these benefits, engaging employers as part of OY career pathways is a constant challenge for those in the field. As we heard from a range of stakeholders, employers respond to a different set of incentives and priorities than do service providers. Because businesses are not reliant on philanthropic funding for survival, but on their own profit-making ability, funders have limited leverage to bring employers to the table or to encourage partnerships with community organizations. And while all of these groups aim to help young people find a role that makes use of their skills and interests, employers tend to be driven more by the needs of the business than the needs of an individual or community. Hiring an employee means making an investment in that person, and employers are keen to see a return on their investment; this means that businesses seek to hire staff members who can be onboarded efficiently and begin to make a positive impact from the beginning. They are less likely to invest time and effort in hiring an individual who will need substantial support and training—at least when the labor market is providing sufficient numbers of qualified workers.

Ultimately, focusing on labor market trends can be an effective way to help engage employers in conversations about OY career pathways. Many fields are anticipating or experiencing a shortage of skilled workers to fill available positions. Service providers can offer programming that links the demand side (employers) with the supply side (OY), thereby building a talent pipeline that can help minimize skills gaps. Once OY are brought on for entry-level jobs, employers are more likely to continue investing in their future success by helping them move up into other roles. Several of the stakeholders we interviewed pointed out that expanding career pathways for OY must be viewed as an economic and workforce development issue, rather than an

issue of education or human services. In this way, it will be integrated into a larger set of labor market initiatives focused on job training and placement—and employers can come to see the huge, untapped potential in the OY population.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT WITH OY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

OY seeking to access a career track face a number of formal and informal barriers to employment. As we heard from young people, CORI checks can be an impediment to hiring those who have been involved in the criminal justice system. More generally, though, employers may set requirements such as a high school or college diploma, even when these are not required to fulfill the job responsibilities, thereby screening out OY who lack such credentials. When OY are competing for jobs against candidates who have more experience in a field or who possess a postsecondary degree, they are less likely to be considered. Additionally, our conversations with youth and leaders in the OY field (not to mention evidence from national research studies) find that implicit bias also plays a role in hiring decisions, with negative impacts on the employment prospects of youth of color.

For young people who are able to successfully navigate the hiring process, the work environment can also pose a challenge. Many OY come from backgrounds where they have not had access to professional role models who can demonstrate key “soft skills” needed to succeed in a job (such as adaptability, communication, and teamwork). They may also be unaccustomed to meeting workplace norms around timeliness, dress, and behavior. Indeed, a number of service providers now focus on helping students develop these workplace-ready skills rather than providing technical training for a particular field or industry, since they will be more broadly applicable (and, potentially, harder to build). Beyond the need for soft skills, OY may also face obstacles at work due to a lack of cultural competency from managers or coworkers. And, given that OY are often supporting themselves or their families, jobs that don’t provide livable wages can present a tremendous obstacle to maintaining full-time employment on a career track.

In the face of these challenges, what can make employment a better and more fruitful long-term experience for OY? To start, providing access to trained and caring workplace mentors is crucial. A mentor can be a trusted advisor for young people in need of support, and mentors can also help OY navigate unfamiliar workplace norms and systems (and build a professional network that can nurture further professional advancement). Not just mentors, but entire offices, can also benefit from training in cultural responsiveness and implicit bias to ensure that the workplace culture is welcoming and supportive for individuals of all backgrounds.

And for those in managerial positions, it is particularly useful to receive training around how to respond thoughtfully to some of the “invisible barriers” that OY may face, from child care and other family obligations to experience with trauma. Service providers can play a useful role in helping provide training and thought partnership for employers on these topics, especially if they remain engaged with young people to provide longitudinal support during employment.

Another approach that can be particularly effective with OY is the use of a cohort model, in which a group of young people are hired together, offering a built-in social network within the workplace. This strategy offers benefits to the young people, who are able to rely on support from a set of peers who understand where they are coming from and what they need to succeed. For employers, meanwhile, working with multiple OY may justify the cost and effort of setting up robust support systems (e.g., mentoring, culturally responsive practices) in a way that working with just one such young person does not. Ultimately, a cohort-based model has the potential to improve the work experience for both youth and employers, leading to higher retention rates among employees—and helping build employers’ confidence in hiring future cohorts of opportunity youth.



Make your own
perception of me,
don't judge me
based on this paper.

Other Actors in the OY Career Landscape

While service providers and employers are central to supporting career pathways for OY, there are a number of others with important roles to play:

- **Boston Public Schools:** As young people reported during our focus groups, schools generally offer limited opportunities for career exploration and exposure to potential trades. While some young people reported that vocational education could be a useful pathway to a career, in Boston, this option is open primarily to students attending a single school, Madison Park Vocational Technical High School. Likewise, real-world learning opportunities such as internships and job shadowing are not available at scale for Boston's students.
- **Institutions of higher education:** Some colleges offer useful training programs that help young people access certificates in specific trades. This can be a more efficient and cost-effective option than seeking a two- or four-year degree, especially for students eager to move quickly through a training program and into a career. More broadly, colleges must be attentive to the wraparound support and career links they provide when serving OY if they are to become a pathway to employment and not just a costly investment in additional education.
- **Funders:** As outlined above, philanthropic support sustains the service sector, and the need to demonstrate positive outcomes creates incentives to hold on to young people rather than encourage them to transfer to other programs that may better address their interests and needs. More broadly, though, philanthropy plays an important role in advancing the field, for example by helping raise the public profile of the need for OY career pathways and building capacity within OY-serving organizations.
- **Network conveners:** With a large and diverse service sector in Boston, network conveners play an important role by bringing stakeholders together to talk through shared challenges and potential solutions. Forums such as the Opportunity Youth Collaborative offer a shared time and space for program staff to learn from each other, bolstering institutional connections and helping mitigate the effects of staff turnover. Stakeholders expressed that the most useful component of these network convenings is the opportunity to dig deep into the service models of other organizations and share resources and effective practices.
- **City and state governments:** City and state government agencies, such as the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, can play a variety of the roles described above: funder, employer, network convener. Perhaps most significantly, the government can help sustain collaboration across sectors over time and encourage partnerships, particularly those that bring together the fields of education, human services, and economic/workforce development.



It is really hard to get employers to care, especially with family circumstances.



How can we build more effective career pathways for OY?

Given what we heard from young people and from leaders in the OY field, what are the key strategies for setting opportunity youth on a pathway to career success? How can service providers, employers, and other partners work together to meet the needs and interests of young people? The following section describes some of the most promising approaches to building effective career pathways, while the blueprint that follows offers a series of questions to help prompt reflection and guide planning efforts among stakeholders in various fields.

Supporting opportunities for career exploration

One of the biggest unmet needs we heard from both youth and OY leaders is career exploration. This process of exploration should take place across multiple sectors, beginning in schools and continuing into colleges, community-based organizations, and other out-of-school service providers. No matter the venue, career exploration should incorporate both career knowledge (that is, learning about different types of jobs and the prerequisites for accessing them) and self-understanding (or recognizing your own strengths and interests). The process of developing career aspirations should also explicitly aim to build young people's concept of growth mindset, or the recognition that skills and abilities can be developed over time,¹³ strengthening their resolve and building resilience to face obstacles in their path.

Career exploration can take many different forms, starting with embedded curriculum units that ask students to investigate career options or take career inventories in order to get a better sense of their interests. Based on comments from OY about the importance of earlier intervention, this process could start as early as elementary school, with opportunities for students

There is an expectation to know what you want right out of high school but nothing to help navigate that.

to learn about various fields and envision themselves in those professions. As students move into high school, they can work with school counselors to develop individualized learning plans that outline relevant coursework and out-of-school learning opportunities that will help students reach their goals. Job shadowing days can help students get a hands-on feel for what it's like to engage in a particular career; these are especially useful for service providers seeking to help students determine whether a particular program (and career path) is the right fit. Practitioners can also explore creative and/or digital solutions that allow students to experience new careers, such as online systems that connect students directly with individuals in different professions and virtual reality simulators that mimic the conditions of a given workplace.

While career exploration is partly about helping young people identify job opportunities that excite them, it is of limited utility if not linked with a clear sense of how to obtain those jobs. In speaking with youth, even those who talked about their “dream job” usually had little understanding of what it took to access it. For that reason, the career exploration process should also help youth map out the prerequisites for attaining a given career (for instance, whether a college degree is required, or whether a certificate will suffice). It should offer a clear sense of next steps to help OY map out their path forward, and be linked to ambitious but realistic end goals that will sustain young people's connection over the long term.

Making K-12 education more relevant to careers and life

Beyond opportunities for career exploration, comments from OY point to a number of other strategies that schools can use to help prepare young people with workplace-ready and life skills. Young people noted that vocational-technical opportunities can ease the transition directly from high school to a career, unlike academic coursework, which seemed to be most conducive to a transition to college. Offering more students outside of Madison Park the option to participate in some form of vocational-technical coursework could help students stay engaged and help them push back against the “college push” (as can school counseling that emphasizes both college *and* career options). In a similar vein, dual enrollment options that allow students to engage in certificate or training programs while still in high school could be useful to raise the profile of these options as alternatives to two- or four-year degree programs.

Whether youth are interested in pursuing college or a career after high school, they would benefit from financial literacy training and civic education that prepare them to make critical life decisions. The OY we spoke with listed a range of topics that they wish they had learned about earlier: taxes, credit, insurance, and debt; resumes and scholarships; elections and voting. Particularly for young people who set out to earn a pricey college degree, understanding the long-term implications and trade-offs of financial decisions is critical. Young people who have graduated or left school should also have access to opportunities to learn about these topics, whether through career training programs or as adjuncts to other forms of wraparound supports (e.g., housing assistance).



High school doesn't teach you about taxes, credit, mortgages. They don't prepare you for the real world.

Promoting “warm hand-offs” between service providers

Based on feedback from young people and the experience of service providers, it is clear that many OY sign on to participate with a given program not because they are passionate about the subject matter but because it happens to be the one they know about. Accessing other options can be difficult, whether because staff lack the information and connections to support a smooth transition to another program, because programs are reluctant to carry out this type of “warm hand-off,” or both. In order to help young people find and participate in programs that are most likely to help them achieve their career goals, there is a need to address both types of challenge.

First, service providers would benefit from a shared understanding of what a warm hand-off looks like and how to achieve it. Staff should be prepared with detailed information about other programs that enables them to provide recommendations and referrals to young people interested in different fields or types of career training. Greater standardization of the data that programs collect—and defined protocols for sharing this data across sites—will also help young people make smoother transitions and minimize the need for duplicative paperwork. And sites would benefit from shared expectations about how young people will be referred to ensure that the youth don’t disengage during the transition process. In all cases, a more transparent and systematic approach will lessen the impact of staff turnover, since knowledge of other providers and connections to those providers will be held not by individual staff but as part of a documented and shared set of resources.

Second, funders should rethink how they measure and evaluate outcomes for youth in order to incentivize partnerships across the OY-serving sector. Rather than focusing on retention and placement rates from particular programs, the philanthropic sector should explore how to create shared models of success centered on the needs of young people; as one service provider put it, speaking to others in the sector, “We need to fund programs to help a young person achieve their outcome, not to achieve your outcome.” One model for this approach is the Launch Initiative, which is based out of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley but brings together a coalition of partners to recruit and coach young people as they navigate workforce, college, and career resources. An explicit part of the model is that participants can connect with different service providers to access the model that best addresses their needs. In this way, service providers are recognized for their success with helping young people move along the path toward greater financial stability and career attainment, rather than for keeping youth in their own programs.



It’s hard to get something unless you know someone.

As a final note, several service providers we spoke with mentioned the lack of dedicated funding available for capacity-building and partnership development within the sector. While this sort of support is often less appealing for funders than helping to sustain youth-facing programming, it is another important avenue for philanthropic dollars (and one that is often overlooked).

Making the most of employment opportunities

Many of the young people we spoke with held low-paying jobs in the retail or service sector, but did not see these as viable or desirable long-term career options. Instead, part-time employment offered a necessary income stream that would help them pay the bills as they prepared for their next steps—as one service provider noted, when looking at the OY population, “They need to work and work fast.” While career pathway programs often focus on building up skills in specific fields, they could do more to connect the soft skills and on-the-job experience that young people gain from part-time employment with a more sustainable, long-term career path.

In particular, service providers can help young people appreciate the value of a part-time role and see this as a training ground for building soft skills. Many employers are less concerned about finding workers with the technical skills needed to succeed in a role than with finding workers who demonstrate creative thinking, problem-solving abilities, collaboration, and initiative. With the support of caring adult mentors, young people can learn to identify and demonstrate these attributes in their current employment. They can also learn how to share evidence of these skills through their resumes, cover letters, and interviews, enabling them to better articulate how they have built a transferable set of workplace-ready abilities. Service providers (with support from philanthropy) may want to explore ways to recognize the skills picked up through training programs and paid employment, such as digital badges that can be shared as part of an online profile or portfolio.

Because of the need for a regular paycheck, unpaid internships are often out of the question for OY. Yet there is still tremendous value in experiencing this form of “structured work try-out.” Service providers and employers should look for ways

to organize schedules so that young people can balance employment with higher-skill internships and training programs. This could certainly include offering paid internships, but it could also extend to short-term job shadowing and unpaid internships with flexible hours (to complement the hours spent at a paying job). Finally, since internships and other work experiences help build students' networks in addition to offering exposure to a career, service providers should look for multiple ways of helping students make connections in their field and build social capital, such as by connecting them with mentors or offering networking advice and opportunities.

Cultivating employer leadership in the OY field

Service providers can help OY access career training and preparation, but accessing a career itself requires employers who will hire opportunity youth and invest in their long-term success. Knowing that a program provides a path to employment serves as a powerful motivator to OY to stay engaged, while also helping program staff develop training programs aligned with employer needs.

Despite the benefits of employer engagement, though, service providers struggle to establish sustained links with employer partners. Businesses may not see it as a worthwhile investment to help build an OY career pipeline when they could hire other candidates directly, or regard their work with OY as more of a community benefit than a true talent pipeline. There remains a need—and a tremendous opportunity—for employers to exercise leadership in the OY field and become champions for the cause of building OY career pathways.

In cultivating employer leadership, service providers have a role to play, particularly when it comes to helping businesses build more culturally competent, supportive work environments. Service providers with expertise in these fields currently offer trainings and ongoing support with topics such as effective mentoring and addressing implicit bias, helping lay the groundwork for employer engagement with OY. Programs can also seek opportunities to place cohorts of OY within area employers, allowing a group of young people to provide a mutually reinforcing support network within the workplace. Additionally, service providers should look for opportunities to reach out to small businesses in addition to larger national companies, giving community institutions the chance to support the success of local youth. And by helping young people build their skills and experiences (particularly around entrepreneurship), service providers can help develop the next generation of business owners and seed support for OY pathways among future executives.

At the same time, though, service providers cannot cultivate employer leadership on their own. Rather, they should seek to raise awareness and build support from those within business and trade associations, city and state governments, and the philanthropic community, who can leverage their connections with business leaders to raise the profile of OY career pathways. Ultimately, as noted above, centering this issue in the sphere of economic and workforce development may help promote employer engagement (and investment) in strong and stable talent pipelines for opportunity youth.

While Boston is a national leader in the field of serving OY, the fact remains that 7,700 young people in the city remain insufficiently attached to college or a career. There remains an urgent need to support opportunity youth as they seek the stability of employment. As we heard from dozens of young people, youth are eager for relevant and responsive educational opportunities and information on real-world concerns like financial literacy. They would like to explore potential career pathways to determine their own strengths and interests, without forsaking the chance to earn a wage. They want to be respected and valued by employers as individuals, and they want to engage in meaningful work with opportunities to learn and grow.

To build a system that better supports these interests, leaders in multiple sectors must think critically about their current practices and areas for improvement. The questions below aim to prompt such reflection. They also point to the need for strong partnerships among OY-serving programs and between service providers and employers—critical elements that affect the supports and experiences available to program participants, even though they are largely invisible to the youth themselves.

By using these questions as a starting point to engage in honest conversations across sectors—conversations that include youth and draw heavily upon youth voice—we can begin to develop more effective career pathways that help youth attain success in the workforce and beyond.

EDUCATORS

K-12

- Do you build time into the schedule for students to connect in meaningful ways with adults about their current needs, their strengths and interests, and their future plans? Do adults have access to training and professional development that enable them to communicate in a supportive and culturally proficient way?
- Do you provide hands-on career explorations experiences at all levels, particularly high school and middle school?
- What opportunities do students have to engage in long-term planning for the future (for instance, through an individualized learning plan or the like)?
- How are a wide range of postsecondary options (not just college) articulated for young people? What supports can young people access to help them understand and explore options besides 2- and 4-year college (including certificate programs or apprenticeship models)?

Higher Education

- Do students have access to on-campus (or community-based) mentors or coaches who can offer targeted, individualized support, particularly when students first enroll? How are mentors prepared for these conversations so they are able to communicate in a supportive and culturally proficient way?
- What supports are available to students in need of assistance with personal, financial, social, and academic concerns? How well-integrated and easily accessible are these services?
- What kinds of credit-bearing, work-based learning experiences are available on campus?
- Does the institution help connect students with paid internship opportunities or other forms of on-the-job training?
- Does the institution offer students formal and informal opportunities to expand their professional networks, as well as preparation on how to successfully navigate these situations?

All Levels

- How, if at all, are students provided access to relevant “real-world” content such as financial literacy and resume writing?
- What career exploration opportunities are available to young people? Do these include opportunities to hear from individuals in different professions and to experience those professions directly (e.g., through a job shadow day)?
- How do you incorporate student voice into decision-making processes?

SERVICE PROVIDERS

- What are the strengths of your organization? What are the areas for improvement? How might you form and leverage partnerships with other organizations to provide a more holistic set of services for young people?
- What supports and professional development are available for staff so they can build a culturally responsive and trauma-sensitive skillset to support the diverse needs of young people?
- How do you identify and engage employer partners? What systems do you have in place to offer two-way training (i.e., training for both youth and employers) on how to help young people succeed in employment opportunities?

- What career exploration opportunities are available to young people? Do these include opportunities to hear from individuals in different professions and to experience those professions directly (e.g., through a job shadow day)?
- How do you stay aware of young people's evolving interests and needs to ensure that your program continues to align with their career intentions and long-term goals?
- Do you offer students formal and informal opportunities to expand their professional networks, as well as preparation on how to successfully navigate these situations?
- How do you incorporate youth voice into decision-making processes?

EMPLOYERS

- What hiring needs do you have that might be filled by opportunity youth? Are there any potential partners in this space you can collaborate with on the identification and support of opportunity youth?
- How can you work with institutions of higher education and/or service providers to offer paid internships to opportunity youth? Do these internship experiences lead to full-time job opportunities?
- How have staff been trained in cultural responsiveness so they are prepared to work effectively with youth employees?
- Do opportunity youth have access to mentors within the organization who can offer support and guidance? How have these mentors been trained to work effectively with youth?
- Are there opportunities for open communication and feedback with community partners?
- Are there on-ramps and upward mobility for opportunity youth employed within the organization?
- Does the organization provide a livable family-sustaining wage/stipend for employed opportunity youth?
- How might your current hiring policies or practices present barriers to opportunity youth seeking employment (e.g., practices related to CORI checks, college degree requirements for positions where a degree is not needed)?
- How do you incorporate youth voice into decision-making processes related to youth hiring, onboarding, and support?

FUNDERS

- How do you measure the success of career preparation programs for opportunity youth?
- What unintended consequences might flow from this definition of success (e.g., retaining youth in a program in order to boost completion rates even if they would be better served elsewhere)?
- How can your organization incentivize the creation of non-competitive partnerships across sectors to promote holistic support for opportunity youth across the city?
- How do you incorporate youth voice into decision-making processes (e.g., by hearing from youth about the services offered by a current or future grantee)?
- How can you support efforts to bring employers to the table to collaborate with educators and service providers on career pathways for opportunity youth?

APPENDIX A

Sources of interview and focus group data

Organizations interviewed as part of landscape data collection:

- Boston Private Industry Council
- Connection Center
- Future Chefs
- Jewish Vocational Services
- Mayor's Office for Workforce Development
- Resilient Coders
- SkillWorks
- United Way

Organizations where we held focus groups:

- Asian American Civic Association
- Center for Teen Empowerment
- Collegebound Dorchester
- East Boston Neighborhood Health Center
- InnerCity Weightlifting
- Year Up
- Youth Options Unlimited

APPENDIX B

Sample focus group activities

The following are examples of activities utilized in the youth focus groups for this project's data collection. Please note that the facilitation and sequence of each activity was contingent on the number of participants and context of the program.

WORD ASSOCIATION

Youth participants are asked to share the first word or phrase that comes to mind after each prompt.

- Summer Job
- High school
- Internship
- Career
- Employer
- Success

STAND UP/SIT DOWN PROMPTS

Youth participants are asked to stand up when they associated with the statement being given. There will be an opportunity to discuss after each prompt.

- I know what industry I want to go into
- I know how to go about getting into my career of choice
- The career I want to pursue has shifted over time
- I had career exploration opportunities in my educational career
- High school prepares/d me for the workplace
- College will/has prepared me for the workplace
- I expect employers to train me on the job
- I know how to go about getting an internship or apprenticeship

BRAINSTORM WALK PROMPTS

Youth participants will join the group in a “gallery walk” where they will respond to the prompts on flipchart paper placing a post-it. As a group we will discuss the responses.

- How would you go about getting a job related to a career you want?
- How would you learn about the career you want?
- What are popular industries of choice?
- What do employers need to know about young people?

PERSONAL & GROUP MAPPING

Youth participants will reflect on their individual career roadmap and complete the roadmap based on the prompts below:

- Fill in your desired end goal/career goal in the space below.
 - What steps do you need to take to get there? How will you complete these steps? (Please write on left side of page)
 - What skills do you need to gain/develop to get there? (Please write on right side of page)
- Now discuss with a partner, working together to answer the following:
 - Where could you use help?
 - What kind of help?
 - What are the challenges that lie ahead and what resources do you need to tackle them?

ENDNOTES

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