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THE YES PROJECT
YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

Finding a Way Forward

Young People's Experiences Navigating the World of Work

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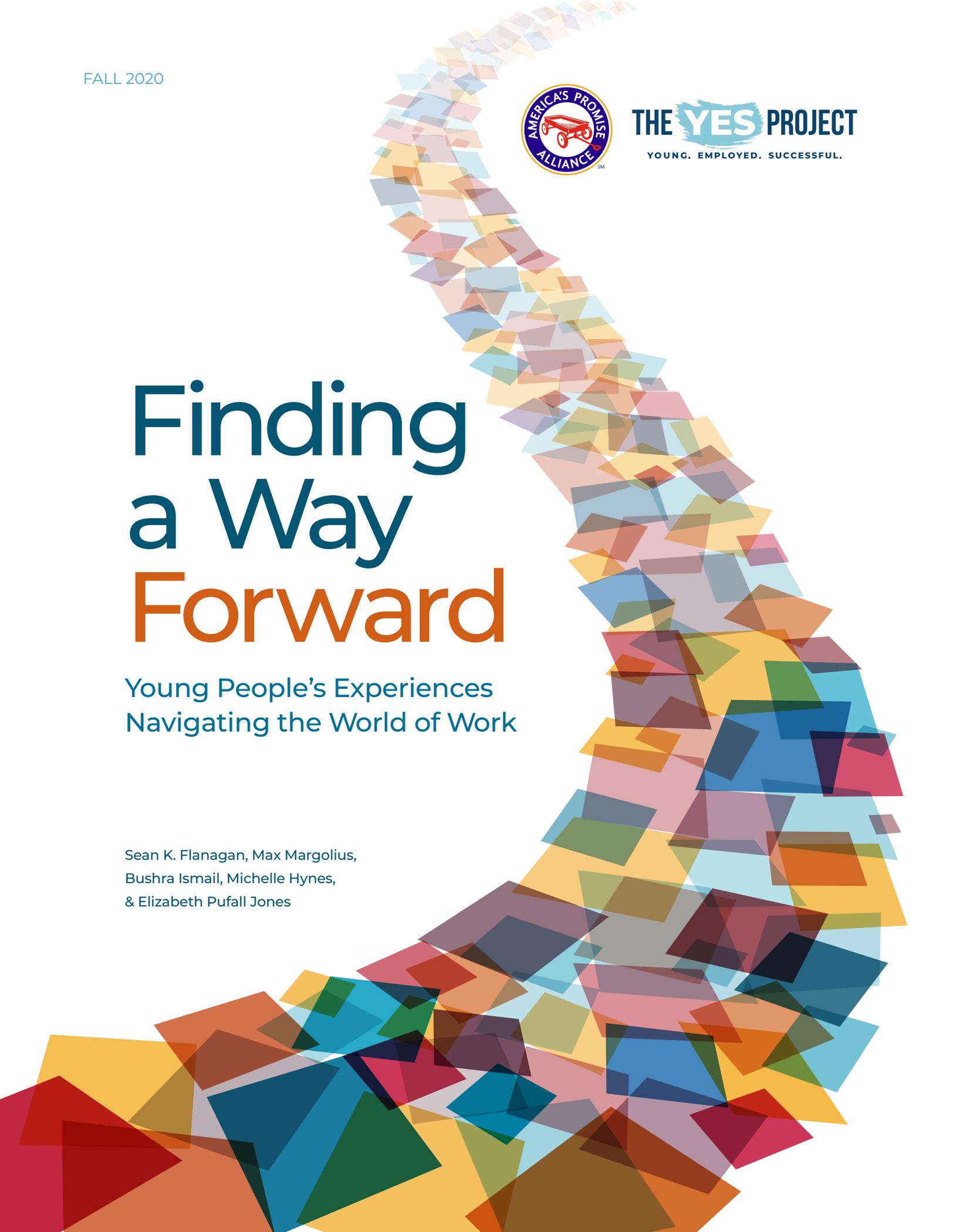
THE YES PROJECT
YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

A YOUTH EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH AGENDA

The YES Project—Young, Employed, Successful—engages America's Promise Alliance and its partners in unifying the nation to reach a major collective goal: every young person seeking a job can find a job. While the COVID-19 pandemic may slow progress toward achieving this goal, the Ready, Connected, Supported framework—a collectively-developed vision that pinpoints what young people need to succeed in the workplace—remains a guide for the YES Project's research agenda. The Center for Promise, the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, is pursuing studies that ground the discourse about youth employment and workforce development in young people's experiences, elevate their voices in a national conversation about work, and explore the role of relationships in facilitating positive workforce outcomes for youth.

This report is one example. *Finding a Way Forward* offers insights about why youth workforce development matters, what eases or thwarts young people's journey along their career pathways, and how communities can contribute to a ready, connected, and supported workforce for the future. It advances the Center's tradition of youth-centered research, beginning with *Don't Call Them Dropouts* and *Don't Quit on Me*, and builds from more recent work on Webs of Support and career pathways for disconnected youth. See americaspromise.org/centerforpromise for more of the Center's publications about connecting young people to work.

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What was your first job? Who helped you get it, and how did you learn what you needed to succeed?

What experiences and relationships have shaped your career journey?

Finding a Way Forward explores specific questions about work and careers from the perspectives of 65 young people, ages 16–28, who are participants in one of five career pathways programs. This qualitative report provides a glimpse into their perceptions of their career journeys amidst today's changing employment landscape. The young people whose voices shaped this report are from groups often excluded from policy conversations—young people of color, those whose families have immigrated to the United States in search of new opportunities, and those from economically disadvantaged and working-class backgrounds. These groups are also disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although data collection for this study was completed just before COVID-related stay-at-home orders swept across the country, this report is being released at a time when young people have been and continue to be deeply affected. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the nation's economy and has decimated an already fragile youth employment landscape. During the first quarter of 2020, nearly half of young adults who were employed had jobs in service-sector industries, which have been among those hit the hardest by the pandemic.[1] This bleak picture is magnified for youth from marginalized racial and ethnic groups—in July 2020, 16.7% of white youth were unemployed, compared to 25.4% of Black and Asian youth and 21.7% of Latinx youth.[2]

The youth unemployment crisis and social disparities in employment outcomes, although exacerbated by the pandemic, are not unique to the current moment. Year after year, youth unemployment within the U.S. remains consistently high—more than double the national average for the overall population.[3] This matters because high levels of unemployment and disconnection levy steep financial burdens for young people as well as society. It is estimated that each young person between the ages of 16-24 who is neither connected to education nor employment will earn $170,740 less over a lifetime; the resultant cost to society is estimated at $529,030 for each of these young people.[4] Especially during this time of high unemployment, it is necessary to connect young people to jobs that can, over time, offer sustainable career pathways, long-term stability, and opportunities to make the kinds of contributions to their communities that the participants in this study clearly crave.

By elevating young people's descriptions of their employment journeys, this report aims to expand understanding of the most important components of young people's career development in ways that can inform youth-centered research, policy, and practice. The qualitative study that shaped this report was structured around the YES Project's **Ready, Connected, Supported** framework: a collectively-developed vision that pinpoints what young people need to succeed in the workplace.

Young people's insights into readiness, connection, and support yielded three primary findings.

FINDING ONE
Young people have a holistic view of readiness that includes what they've learned, what they can do, knowing who they are, *and* adapting to change. Education and skills training are crucial, but they are not enough; participants in this study described that becoming ready is a complex, ongoing process that also includes identity development and adaptability.

FINDING TWO
Young people believe connections and social capital are essential for navigating their career journeys—but often struggle to build them. While young people benefit from relationships with close connections like family, friends, and teachers, many report a lack of access to a wider array of professional networks that can provide entry points to, footholds in, and engagement with the world of work.

FINDING THREE
Young people's work and life roles are not siloed from one another; they require a multi-dimensional, whole-person approach to support. Young people assert that the supports they need are not limited to their work lives. They issue a call to action for communities and workplaces to support the whole person.

Despite traditional efforts to compartmentalize work and life issues for the purposes of policy, practice, and scholarship, participants in this study indicated that what happens in life influences work and what happens at work influences life. Ultimately, young people want the world of work to recognize their inherent worth as human beings; and they crave opportunities to contribute to society, their communities, and their families through decent, meaningful, and impactful work experiences. Brock and Jason,[A] two of the study participants, illuminated some of these themes in their dialogue below.

A To protect young people's privacy, their names have been replaced with aliases that they each chose during the group interviews. Program and place names have also been redacted to protect young people's identities. Age, race, and gender identifiers are all self-reported and use the young person's own descriptions (e.g. Black or African American).

> " We want to be treated as individuals who have value. We want to be supported, we want to feel connected to the company and the work we're doing, we want to feel connected to our communities, and just making a difference through small things, and I guess just treated like a person. I feel like there's so much de-humanizing that goes on in the workplace. And I'm sure you've all seen "the millennials are killing the 'blank' industry" articles where it's so much blame is being foisted upon the millennial generation, because "we're doing these things, we're ruining industries, we're taking down capitalism, we're doing all these awful things," when it really just boils down to, we want to be treated like human beings who have value.
>
> BROCK, 24, WHITE, MALE

> Trying to work off that point, like you said, we've seen our parents, just the past generations offering their work. And so we've seen how you can just kind of slip in and be a cog in the machine and just work in one spot, go live for 40 years, go hard, go deep, and then just retire and do whatever you want. But now…it's not really possible for us as individuals in the workplace. So whenever we have that security and whenever we can know our work is purposeful, our work is meaningful, but most importantly, our work can be expanded…if we have that security, we have that knowledge with us, then at that point the sky's the limit.
>
> JASON, 23, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

What the 65 young people like Jason and Brock who contributed to this research show is that they are hard-working, thoughtful, intelligent, strategic, compassionate, resilient, values-driven, and motivated— positive attributes that the discourse on youth employment often leaves out.

Finding a Way Forward offers an important counter-narrative to prevailing ideas about young people that center on adultist, classist, and racist narratives—that younger generations are unmotivated, self-interested, or unrealistic in their career aspirations. This counter-narrative is particularly urgent at a time when renewed calls for racial justice, combined with the disparate economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, are intensifying the need for more responsive and equitable employment systems.

The findings presented in this report indicate that many longstanding approaches to supporting youth employment do not honor the way that young people experience the world. Historically, the systems and practices that support career and workforce development have often separated skills from identities, work lives from personal lives, school from work, and individuals from contexts. **A youth-centered perspective has the potential to unify these fragmented efforts and inform policy, practice, and research through interdisciplinary approaches that are deeply grounded in the experiences of young people.**

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report summarizes findings from a qualitative research study that explicitly examined the YES Project's Ready, Connected, Supported framework.

The report's key findings each illustrate a different facet of the framework. At the same time, the stories of these young people emphasize that readiness, connection, and support are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct, with each representing a critical and interdependent aspect of young people's journeys through the world of work.

The sections that follow describe the methodology for the study, some key underlying theory that organized the analysis, and a detailed description of each area of the findings. Each section illustrates aspects of a career journey from young people's perspectives—highlighting how young people describe becoming ready, developing connections, and accessing support along the way.

Study Overview and Methods

This qualitative study was guided by these two research questions:

- How do young people describe what it means to become ready, connected, and supported to reach their employment goals?

- How do contextual factors, including the barriers young people encounter and conditions that help them cope, shape their journey to becoming ready, connected, and supported?

To answer these questions, the research team conducted 10 group interviews in five U.S. cities with a total of 65 young people between the ages of 16 and 28. Each young person was enrolled in or had completed a career pathways program at the time they participated in the study. *(See Appendix B for a description of each interview site.)*

Young people's responses were systematically analyzed to uncover common themes. *(See Appendix A for a detailed description of the methodology and Appendix D for the code frequency[B] table.)*

Theoretical Frameworks

The Center for Promise's research efforts are grounded in a positive youth development framework. From this perspective, every young person has unique strengths and potential. Young people develop through mutually influential, bi-directional relationships with the environments around them.[5] Young people are more likely to experience positive developmental outcomes, within and outside their work lives, when they are embedded in

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B A code is a word, short-phrase, or label that "assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to reduce or summarize larger blocks of text within the interview transcripts into meaningful units of analysis (Saldana, 2009, p. 3).

nurturing and supportive contexts filled with people, culture, institutions, and public policies that are aligned with their strengths and needs—what is referred to as a positive youth system.[6]

Access to a positive youth system, however, is not a universal experience afforded to all young people. Systemic barriers such as racism, inequitable educational and workforce opportunities, and other influences on class and wealth disparities (e.g., inequitable housing or lending policies), can impede a young person's access to nurturing developmental systems and their likelihood of experiencing positive developmental outcomes. While persistent barriers and adversity can undermine positive development, the effect on young people's lives is not immutable.

Relationships play a critical role in supporting youth facing significant barriers to healthy development. Young people are best positioned to thrive in all aspects of their lives, including their careers, when they have access to a robust web of supportive relationships, which can connect young people to a network of caring adults and resources to buffer the effects of adversity and support their career development.[7] The Webs of Support model provides a more complete picture of how relationships operate in the lives of young people and how they can act as a critical vehicle for resources and support.

In addition, the YES Project's Ready, Connected, Supported framework expands upon relational,[8] developmental,[9] and systems theories of career development,[10] drawing particularly from Career Construction Theory and the Psychology of Working Theory, two preeminent perspectives within career development and vocational psychology research. Each of these theoretical frames influenced the study design, shaped the analysis, and is reflected in how young people talk about their experiences.


FIGURE 1: Webs of Support Model

Career Construction Theory seeks to explain how career development processes unfold across the lifespan as individuals navigate their work lives in the global, post-industrial, 21st–century economy.[11] Individuals construct their careers through a process of adaptively aligning their work roles with their changing self-concept throughout their lives and especially during times of key transitions—e.g., from school to work, job to job, from unemployed to employed.[12]

The **Psychology of Working Theory (PWT)** embraces the importance of access to decent work[c] that fulfills basic human needs like safety and adequate compensation, as well as the ways in which contextual factors affect the pursuit of dignified work for socially marginalized and economically constrained individuals.

C In the PWT framework, decent work opportunities promote wellbeing and work fulfillment by providing a safe workplace, fair income, adequate healthcare, time for rest, and meeting workers' family and social needs (Duffy et al., 2016, p. 130).

DEMOGRAPHICS OVERVIEW

RACE/ETHNICITY

9% White

5% Asian American

23% Hispanic/Lantinx

52% Black/African American

9% Multiracial

2% Other
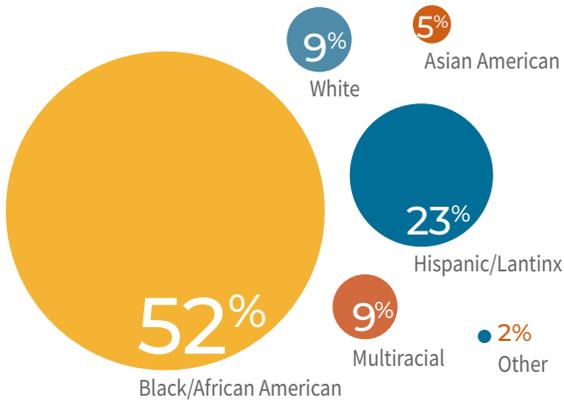
AVERAGE AGE

20.6 years

EDUCATION LEVEL
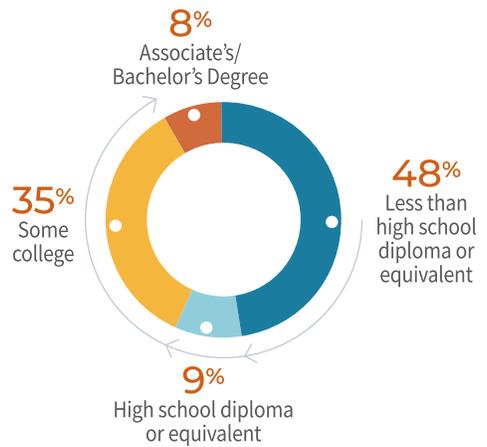
8% Associate's/ Bachelor's Degree

48% Less than high school diploma or equivalent

35% Some college

9% High school diploma or equivalent

57% Enrollment in a degree-granting education program

(in or outside their career pathways program)

GENDER

60% FEMALE

40% MALE

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

52% EMPLOYED

15% Full time

85% Part time

48% UNEMPLOYED

87% Looking for employment

13% Not looking
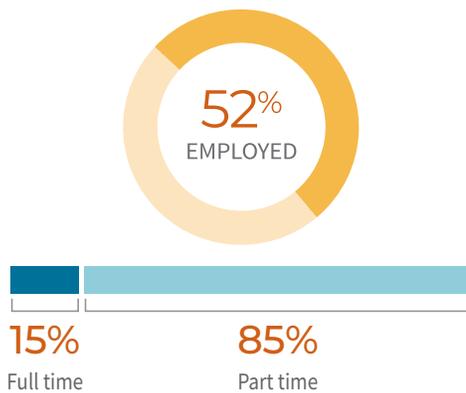
FINDINGS

As noted in the Introduction, this study offers findings that are tied to each of the core concepts of the YES Project's Ready, Connected, Supported framework.

Young people's insights into readiness, connection, and support yielded three primary findings.

FINDING ONE
Young people have a holistic view of readiness that includes what they've learned, what they can do, knowing who they are, *and* adapting to change. Education and skills training are crucial, but they are not enough; participants in this study described that becoming ready is a complex, ongoing process that also includes identity development and adaptability.

FINDING TWO
Young people believe connections and social capital are essential for navigating their career journeys—but often struggle to build them. While young people benefit from relationships with close connections like family, friends, and teachers, many report a lack of access to a wider array of professional networks that can provide entry points to, footholds in, and engagement with the world of work.

FINDING THREE
Young people's work and life roles are not siloed from one another; they require a multi-dimensional, whole-person approach to support. Young people assert that the supports they need are not limited to their work lives. They issue a call to action for communities and workplaces to support the whole person.

Young people's perspectives add to the definitions in the Ready, Connected, Supported framework shown in Figure 2. While the framework offers ways to organize different facets of young people's experience and connect their narratives to existing literature, it is important to note that young people talk about the framework's concepts in highly interrelated ways.

Themes related to adversity, work-life integration, and the importance of diverse and flexible career pathways cut across the three areas of the findings and are discussed within each.

Together, the findings provide a rich picture of how young people conceptualize becoming ready, connected, and supported for the world of work.

READY to enter and advance through the workforce with skills and confidence.

SUPPORTED by various sources who provide assistance and resources leading to and through employment.

CONNECTED to the relationships and learning experiences needed to access new opportunities.

FIGURE 2: Ready, Connected, Supported Framework

Overall, these theoretical concepts come to life as interconnected facets of a lifelong journey.

THE ROLE OF ADVERSITY AND RESILIENCE IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The young people who participated in this research study describe a barrage of barriers, adversities, and constraints that have shaped their developmental experiences, impeded their progress along productive pathways to employment, and compelled them to focus their energies and resources on coping with immediate life demands. *(See Appendix D.)*

In the interviews conducted for this study, young people referenced a significant number of barriers, constraints, and/or adverse life experiences, including:

- poverty and financial hardship;
- parenting and caretaking responsibilities;
- housing insecurity and involuntary relocation;
- school and community violence;
- domestic violence and abuse;
- death or loss of a parent or other family member;
- parental divorce, separation, or strained relationship;
- parent or family physical or mental illness;
- parent drug and alcohol abuse;
- parent incarceration;
- mental and physical health concerns (e.g., depression, anxiety, trauma);
- risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, getting into fights);
- discrimination and bias (e.g., based on race, gender, sexual orientation);
- disparities and resource inequities within their schools and communities;
- negative peer relationships; and
- exposure to unsafe and precarious work and learning settings.

While previous studies[D] have catalogued barriers and adverse experiences, *Finding a Way Forward* illustrates examples of these adversities embedded throughout young people's journeys, providing a richer understanding of how young people view the effects of adversity on their career development. Adversity, and young people's resilient responses, fundamentally shape and reshape both the role work plays and the young person's relationship to work.

D e.g., Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Howard et al., 2010; Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003.

FINDING ONE
Young people have a holistic view of readiness that includes what they've learned, what they can do, knowing who they are, *and* adapting to change.

What does it mean to become ready for the world of work? Across the group interviews, participants in this study described readiness as more than a milestone or an achievement. Instead, they assert that it is a complex, ongoing process that includes:

- acquiring relevant education, training, and work-based learning experiences;
- honing a range of competencies and skills to demonstrate their abilities as workers;
- developing and refining their identities to guide the way; and
- adapting to change as they navigate their journeys through education and work.

While much of the literature distinguishes among these processes, the young people in this qualitative study describe them together as interrelated aspects of becoming ready. Young people's insights on these facets of readiness are detailed below.

Acquiring Relevant Education, Training, and Applied Experience

Young people recognize the importance of postsecondary education and applied work experience (e.g., internships, jobs, work-based learning) as key bargaining chips in the labor market and vehicles for developing other dimensions of readiness (e.g., competencies, identity). At the same time, achieving a formal credential or gaining applied experience may be blockaded by significant systemic barriers and/or adverse circumstances.

For example, CiCi noted that education is more than a degree; it is a lifeline, a future. However, it is not one that is easily accessible.

> I'm [city] born and raised…I went to the known high schools here. But in [this city] it's either you're smart enough to get out, you're on the corner selling drugs, you're shooting somebody down, or you're a junkie. That is not what I wanted, so I knew that education would help me a little bit more. I knew that it would get me out.
>
> My family is okay…we have meals on the table, we have a roof over our head…but college wasn't really pushed on us, because we could not afford it…even though the government says my mom makes too much. But in reality, she doesn't really make enough. My dad is sick so he doesn't work, and so when I started at [community college] for my first semester, I was like, "I can pay out of pocket, it will be fine." And then I saw that three classes was $1,000 or something, for three classes. I was like ugh, this is going to be tricky.
>
> CICI, 20, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE

Educational attainment and credential completion can provide access to higher-wage, sustainable career opportunities and positive long-term career outcomes.[13] However, as CiCi described, even alternatives like community college that are presumed to be more accessible than a four-year college pathway may present nearly impossible choices for many working-class families. Many of the young people involved in this research cited barriers to education including costs, confusing application processes, discrimination, and the demand to balance multiple life roles and responsibilities (e.g., caretaking) while attending.

CiCi went on to describe how barriers to educational attainment can pose consequent roadblocks to future labor market entry, highlighting how, in addition to fostering relevant skills, education also serves as a gatekeeper and cultural status marker that signals one's credibility within the world of work.[14]

> At first, I was so terrified to do it, because it's like well, I'm out the running. I don't have a Bachelor's degree. I don't have any education, I don't have any of these skills.
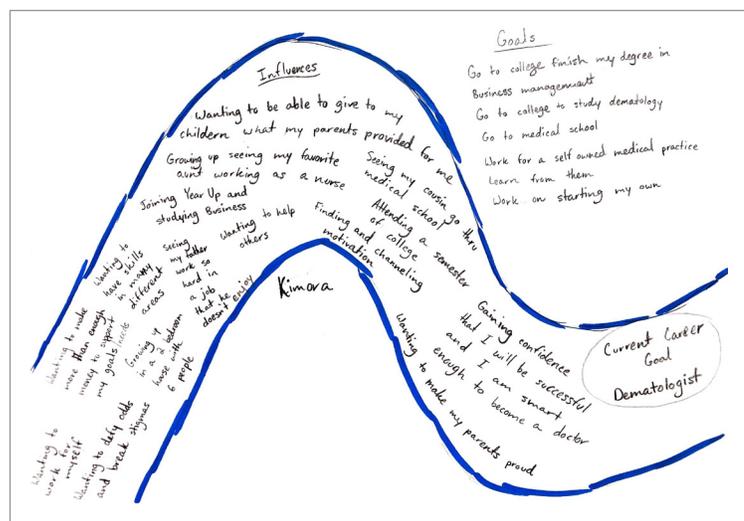
Kimora completed this drawing as part of the data collection process. It highlights the prominent role of education along her journey, the multiple educational paths she's taken, and the variety of social influences on her career aspirations.

However, her story took a turn after she connected with a career pathways program that provided a more tailored learning experience and an alternative pathway to becoming ready.

> Now it's like, I have these skills. I have two IT certifications. I'm the first graduated person from college in my family. If I'm not ready now, it's no way I'm going to be ready ever. I have the skills, I have the knowledge, I have the want and the actual drive to do it now.
>
> I now have the fire lit under me, ready to go because I was trained to do what I could do. I had some of these skills already learned from my mom and my grandmom, and [this program] just saw them, honed in on them, and helped me add a few more…I'm not afraid to put in a job application where it says minimum of Bachelor's degree anymore.
>
> CICI, 20, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE

Here, CiCi noted a marked shift in her confidence, sense of self, and future outlook, explaining that attaining a degree, formally recognized certifications, and relevant training through her career pathways program have empowered her to participate in the job search process equipped with a conviction that she is "ready to go."

Education is not the only process that enables young people to get a foothold. Participants noted that, work experience can help young people learn key skills, show that they can succeed at work, and bridge the school-to-work transition. For many young people, however, gaining access to decent jobs and work-based learning opportunities without prior experience can be fraught with challenges.

> In my six months of job searching, I looked at a lot of job descriptions. Obviously, a lot of them are tailored specifically for the field. "Must have a Bachelor's degree in business administration with a focus in…" or "equivalent work experience," which apparently equivalent work experience to a four-year degree is like eight years in the field. And there's a ton of, whereas even if I didn't have a degree, the "entry level position," requires two years experience. So you've got to go get an internship or something and those don't typically pay or if they do, it's not very well. And so I think I was just kind of in this trapped area where I didn't really feel like I was ready.
>
> BROCK, 24, WHITE, MALE

As Brock explained, to be ready in today's world of work, young people require a strong portfolio of both formal education or credentials and applied work experience. As the participants' experiences illustrate, however, it is not just any education or experience, but rather the "right" types of education and applied experience that are most highly valued and regarded.[15] The implicit and explicit privileging of certain types of experience over others within the U.S. labor market runs deep. Cultural and institutional norms within U.S. education and workforce systems persistently fail to recognize and reward the diverse range of young people's skills and experiences. As young people encounter significant barriers to accessing the "right" kinds of experience, the structural inequities that govern access to promising pathways will further perpetuate educational and workforce disparities.

Honing Competencies and Skills

In addition to formal education and experience, career readiness frameworks often focus on desired competencies or skills[E]—academic and technical; social, emotional, and cognitive; and career management—that are related to a young person's preparation for successful entry into, and progress through, the world of work. The range of competencies that the young people in *Finding a Way Forward* described are largely consistent with these dimensions of readiness. However, while research and theory traditionally differentiate these competencies, young people discuss them in deeply integrated ways. Their perspectives blur the boundaries that frame these distinct categories and reflect more recent advancements in scholarship, suggesting that cognitive, social, emotional, and other competencies are indivisibly interlinked and complementary.[16]

Nely reflected on this in her own training, noting how academic skills become far more relevant and meaningful to her when they are applied within a project-based context that allows her to hone the practical skills she needs for her job.

> I hate math, but I'm doing math right now without me even noticing. Cutting the quarters, and cutting five-eighths, and sixteenths and everything…during the training they teach you how to basically do the math. I actually got out there to work, and I was doing side paneling…I started noticing, damn…I know my quarters, I know my five-eighths, I know my sixteenths without even trying. It's like, am I actually doing math here?
>
> NELY, 23, HISPANIC, FEMALE

While educational systems often ask young people to learn math before applying that knowledge to their work, Nely explained that for some young people, it works better the other way around. Nely also reflected on the confidence that she felt when she recognized her growing skill in construction, noting the social and emotional processes that interactively shaped cognitive and technical skill development.

Hazelnut shared the variety of social and emotional competencies she is developing through her part-time work experiences, highlighting their intersection with key career management and professional skills, and underscoring how these early experiences will prepare her later in her career.

> To be ready for today's world of work, young people require a strong portfolio of both formal education or credentials and applied work experience.

> I feel like they all [job experiences] have an impact on me and make me learn in some way or the other. Sometimes you think as like, "Oh, she only serves pizza slices." Or, "She's only a cashier." Or, "She only takes orders over the phone." But I feel like it's more than that. It's helped me build communication, it's helped me go up to a person and ask them, "Do you need anything?" Or, "Can I help you with something?" And it's just something that sticks to you, and that has helped me a lot in facilitating and networking with others at the [company], getting my way around, or asking for help, stuff like that.

E Competencies is an umbrella term representing "collections of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) that are needed for effective performance in the [sic] jobs" (Campion et al., 2011, p. 226). In this study, these various terms are used interchangeably to reflect language used by young people.

…Also just working with different races is something that I'm so happy that I've already experienced because I know that's just going to continue in life and it's not something that I have to worry when I'm 24 and I have this degree but I don't know how to communicate with people. I know how to work with people because I already have done so throughout these small opportunities.

HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Opportunities to practice communication, perspective taking, and initiating interpersonal interactions within her part-time job helped Hazelnut lay a foundation for more complex social, emotional, and career management skills such as networking, navigating social contexts, and engaging others with multicultural humility and fluency. Hazelnut's perspective is consistent with existing research, which suggests that social and emotional competencies are often employed in service of other skills that enable workers to achieve more complex tasks (e.g., collaborative problem solving, leadership, flexibility, teamwork, etc.) within their social worlds.[17]

Violet furthered this point, explaining not only how she is able to build a range of interpersonal and planning skills at work, but also the ways that her success at her job instills a feeling of pride, accomplishment, and self-efficacy.

" I'm a server for elderly people, and…being a server, I know how it is to deal with people in difficult situations, I mean, in a stressful environment sometimes. And I know what it's like to feel good at the end of the day, like, "Yeah, I helped feed these people." And almost three times a week I work, and I walk over there, and I get dressed, and I'm ready, and I know how to prepare my schedule. And after, around 7:00, I do my homework.

VIOLET, 16, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

The skills Violet referenced above enable her to balance responsibilities between work and school, utilizing both experiences to grow her readiness. Though research, practice, and policy have historically sought to neatly categorize academic, social, emotional, and career competencies, young people describe these skills in complex and interactive ways, suggesting that one facet of readiness is the ability to adaptively blend these interlinked competencies to serve one's work and career.

> Becoming ready is as much about knowing who you are as it is about what you've learned or what you can do.

Developing and Refining Identity

In addition to education and skills, young people explained that becoming ready is as much about knowing who you are as it is about what you've learned or what you can do.[18] The study participants made clear that career identity development cannot be divorced from an individual's broader personal and social identities. Young people's stories illustrate that they rely not only on their emergent career identities within the world of work, but also on their broader personal and social identities as guidestars for their employment journeys. As Hazelnut shared, identity represents:

> Having a foundation within yourself, knowing who you are and not because you try to open doors somewhere else that you forget your roots or where you come from.
>
> HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

The young people involved in this research study described the importance of opportunities to engage in career exploration, decision-making, and efforts to translate personal conceptions of who they are and who they would like to become into what one scholar calls a "publicly recognized vocational identity" within the world of work.[19] These processes begin through broad exploration of one's self and the world of work through a range of formal and informal interactions and experiences.[20]

As young people explore and clarify their career identities, they engage with structural and institutional influences, family and friends, and key learning experiences in school and work-based settings. For example, Alex described the ways opportunities for more in-depth exploration through school, relationships with close friends, and a supportive network of caring adults helped clarify his strengths, interests, and goals.

> I'm good at math, I'm good at science, I love chemistry, I love these different fields. But in terms of where I wanted to go career wise, like I couldn't see myself being a lawyer and doctor…So I felt psychology will probably be a career path to go down to learn how to help people who deal with traumatic situations. Between that and my support system, between my godmother and my sister, and then my one of my church members, mom's friends, they were all psychologists so they gave me a mentorship of what to expect within the field. Going through all of that, I ended up going on to graduate high school. I decided to commit to the psychology field.
>
> ALEX, 23, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

Early opportunities to explore oneself as a worker and gain exposure to the world of work are critical for identity development. However, young people with less social and economic privilege may not always have access to opportunities to explore different pathways.[21]

> I think that's where the gap in our communities lie, because on one hand you have the upper-class that has the means of being able to expose their children to different things. You have the middle-class who's struggling to just take care of their child and in a survival mode where they can't, they don't have the time to allow their kids to explore and live. Then their kids grow up, they end up being the same way because they never really discovered what they want to do and what's their passion.
>
> QUAZ, 19, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

As Quaz alluded to, beginning in childhood, systemic barriers, adversity, and/or social marginalization based on one's broader identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) can threaten positive identity exploration and development.[22] Danielle expands on this as she describes the way a college tour guide's pointed question undermined her aspiration of pursuing a postsecondary pathway toward a career in dental medicine.

> I was the only Black kid in the whole group. And she came up to me and she said, "Have you heard more about like scholarships and stuff?" And, she was basically just asking like how to pay for it, if I got to college. And that kind of like turned me off from doing the dental assistant thing. That I felt like, I don't know. I didn't want to be around people like that. That's probably not how everyone is. That's just how she was. And she turned me off from all of it.
>
> DANIELLE, 17, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

Danielle and other young people in *Finding a Way Forward* described the persistent difficulty of encountering systemic and interpersonal racism along their journeys. Those experiences created barriers to accessing resources, experiences, and opportunities that affirmed their identities and promoted career advancement.[23]

However, experiences that foster one's racial and ethnic identity can also serve as a deep source of strength. Hazelnut described the acculturative stress she experienced after her parents lost their jobs, forcing her family to leave the city she grew up in, move in with relatives in another state, and attend a primarily white suburban school. In contemplating whether to attend a primarily white college, she explains how her earlier experience strengthened her cultural identity and equipped her with a deepened sense of self and community to anchor her.

> **Career identity development cannot be divorced from aspects of an individual's broader personal and social identities.**

> So, I feel like even though I were to go to this small town or small city [for college] where it's mostly white people, I know that I'm Hispanic, I know that I'm Mexican, I know my culture, I know my food, my music, I know everything about me, and that's what makes me, me. So, even though I would leave my community, my community wouldn't leave me.
>
> HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Hazelnut's story underscores how identity can provide stability and direction in the face of uncertainty.[24] While environmental stressors can undermine positive identity development, experiences of productive coping, opportunities to derive meaning from one's successes and struggles, and a sense of belonging within a supportive community can affirm and strengthen one's identity.[25]

Quaz highlighted the anchoring role that his mother played in his early career exploration and identity development.

> Lucky for me, I was able to actually get out there and really hone in on what I want to do because my mother worked so hard and at the same time really gave me the attention that I needed to see to it that I discovered what I wanted to do. So now I'm able to build upon that.
>
> QUAZ, 19, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

Young people without an anchoring relationship like the one Quaz described may rely more strongly on schools and programs to support identity development. Alexis, for example, reflected on how her career pathways program, in partnership with her high school, provided new opportunities to engage in project-based learning, structured career development activities, and college access exploration.

> I was really appreciative of those because I could explore my interests more in depth instead of just researching it online and stuff. It was more hands-on and I could get feedback from students that go to those schools, and learn more about their majors, and how they like it, and how they work with it and stuff.
>
> ALEXIS, 18, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE

Establishing a positive career identity is a critical aspect of readiness and is associated with higher levels of life and career satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health, and successful transition into adulthood.[26] As the young people in this report illustrate, career identity development is a deeply relational process that cannot be separated from broader identity development. It is nurtured through supportive environments, opportunities to explore one's talents and interests, and a developing sense of self that can help orient a young person to and through the world of work.

Adapting to Change

Adaptability is a critical aspect of readiness for securing employment and growing a career in today's changing world of work. While identity furnishes young people with a sense of direction along their journeys, career adaptability provides the psychosocial resources and strategies to navigate changes, responsibilities, and barriers that arise along the way.[27] Many of the participants in this study also described having to adapt in order to continue working toward their goals in the face of significant personal adversity and systemic barriers. Along their journeys, many young people encounter obstacles that are not mere bumps in the road, but a fundamental reshaping of both the road and the person walking it. As Nely and Tee expressed:

> I think we all have obstacles that get in between our life that have made us, like, stop us from wanting to do something. And take us to a whole different road. And that's one thing that we all have connected: being young and having obstacles we don't know what to do with.
>
> NELY, 23, HISPANIC, FEMALE

> [W]e just want to do better. Whether it's just getting our high school diploma, we're still trying. Even though we're struggling, we're still trying. And I feel like we're aware of things that we've been through and it's shaped us to who we are.
>
> TEE, 21, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

The hard work, grit, and initiative that are evident in the narratives of young people like Nely, Tee, and the other participants in *Finding a Way Forward*, however, constitute only one piece of the puzzle. "Bootstrap" examples of personal responsibility are often not enough in the face of significant, systemic, and persistent barriers.[28] For example, despite many participants' efforts to work harder, invest in multiple strategies to grow their readiness, and will their way forward, many young people are confronted with a reality that, as one young woman said, *"40 hours of work and full-time college does not go hand in hand."* Adaptability, therefore, is not just a matter of perseverance or personal responsibility in the face of barriers; rather, it describes the capacity to use a range of strategies that can help to cope with those barriers.

The study participants described adaptation strategies that include advocating for oneself, goal adjustment and prioritization, seeking support, perseverance, independent problem solving, identifying and seizing new opportunities, changing one's environment, and cognitive strategies and mindset shifts (e.g., self-reflection, optimism, hope), among others. *(See the code counts in Appendix D.)* These strategies align closely with developmental theories of goal pursuit and self-regulation, which suggest that young people may draw on both internal and external resources to adapt in pursuit of their life and career ambition.[29] Further, their stories illustrate that the strategies young people adopt to manage career barriers are often integrally linked to the strategies that have proven effective in managing difficult experiences throughout their lives.

Many of the young people included in this study reported turning toward relationally focused adaptability strategies, such as seeking support and advocating for oneself to leverage external resources that complement individual adaptability strategies. For example, Johnny described how significant adversities such as parent substance use, neglect, and domestic abuse overwhelmed his abilities to cope with trauma on his own, leading him to leave high school before graduating. Johnny's adaptation strategy of seeking support helped him begin to heal and ultimately re-engage with school and a career pathways program.

> "Bootstrap" examples of personal responsibility are often not enough in the face of significant, systemic, and persistent barriers.

> Once I left school, I kind of just, I was in between jobs for a bit but mostly just to maintain, wasn't really thinking of any goals or…I was just kind of stuck. I was letting my emotions get to me. Kind of still mad at the world. Eventually I just decided to put myself in therapy and just talked it out. Therapy helped out a lot. Yeah, because I was going through a self-destructive path. And I just made an appointment. I been through three different therapists. But, I gave them a shot and yeah, it's helped me.
>
> JOHNNY, 27, HISPANIC, MALE

CiCi explained how experiences with toxic school, work, and family cultures have shaped her adaptation strategies to advocate strongly for supportive policies and cultures within the workplace.

> I'm still positive, but I still have that caution of, I need to know beforehand, is this company diverse? Will you allow me to be queer and Black in your company? Will I have any backlash from anybody being racist, or accusing me of something that I didn't do before handing me the evidence? I don't ask those questions outright, I form them in a professional way, because that's what you have to do so that they don't feel like "what are you trying to say about my company?" It makes me do more research. I dig in way more on the jobs, and I call and I see what their employees think about it. When I'm waiting in the waiting room, "How do you feel working here? How is it there?" and if they think it's okay, I feel like it's okay. I still have to get my footing and see if it's actually okay.
>
> CICI, 20, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE

At times, however, even compensatory efforts like those mentioned above may be insufficient in helping a young person adapt to challenges. Many young people in *Finding a Way Forward* reported having to adjust or re-prioritize their goals or plans in light of insurmountable barriers that led them to "veer off" and find alternate routes to success along their journey.

After personal, financial, and academic struggles disrupted his postsecondary path toward psychology, Alex identified a software engineering track within his career pathways program as a viable way to meet his more immediate needs, while striving to integrate these skills into his long-term career goals.

> So I decided, "Okay, well I love psychology. I don't want to give it up, but obviously, I feel I can still make space for another valuable skill." So I chose software engineering…As of right now, I am pursuing, I guess a career in the computer science field, so software engineering. But I think I want to try to integrate, probably go back to graduate school for psychology and then integrate software engineering into my career for research and other things.

ALEX, 23, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

The young people in this study underscored that even the best laid plans require young people to "figure things out as you go."

> I feel like maybe you're not ready with a solution, but you are already knowing the obstacles that you're going to probably face…Ready is knowing your obstacles even though you don't know the solution but, sooner or later, it's just going to come to you…I feel like you just figure things out as you go. Because you can't really plan your life out.

HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

The young people involved in this research demonstrated considerable resilience, adapting to career-specific demands and transitions while simultaneously managing grave adversity and stressors across their broader lives. Their stories illustrate a critical need for career and workforce development research, policy, and practice to incorporate holistic understandings of the ways in which adversity and coping shape young people's work lives.[F]

Young people's perspectives affirm and expand upon existing literature and research about what it means to become ready for the world of work. Over recent decades, the educational and economic sciences have pioneered a range of efforts to operationalize and measure career readiness.[30] The resulting policy and practice frameworks and recommendations tend to focus on skills and competencies.[31] However, more recent advances within the psychological sciences—namely vocational psychology and career development scholarship—have shifted focus toward the many broader developmental processes (e.g., identity, adaptability) that position a young
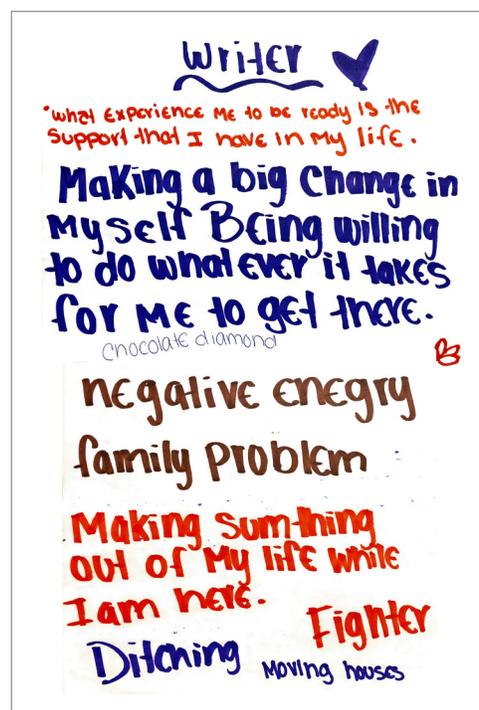
Diamond's drawing illustrates multiple adversities and barriers along her career path as well as her adaptability and resilience as she pursues her professional goals.

F   Research and theory suggest that young people rely on career adaptability to furnish a sense of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence about how to resolve issues within their work lives (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Existing research, however, offers fewer insights into how young people adapt to manage both specific career concerns and the broader risk factors that may impede career progress and overall well-being (Blustein, 2006; Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Duarte, Silva, & Paixão, 2017; Richardson, 2012). Historically, the strands of scholarship related to domain-specific career adaptability and domain-general coping and resilience have developed along related, yet separate, lines. This fragmentation has left gaps in both research and practice that could inform support for how young people adapt and respond to demands across their lives.

person to effectively navigate their world.[32] Scant attention has been devoted to integrating existing skills-focused policy and practice frameworks with more holistic developmental perspectives, resulting in little cross-sector consensus across research, practice, and policy.

The young people's voices in *Finding a Way Forward* offer a youth-centered perspective that can bridge the chasm between these related, yet disparate bodies of work to provide a more holistic portrait of readiness. Consistent with the Ready, Connected, Supported framework, young people portray readiness as a dynamic developmental process that accounts for education, competencies, identity, and adaptability in a deeply integrated way that varies based on each young person's unique situation.[33]

reflection

How can your program or agency embrace a whole-person approach to career and workforce development?

How are you providing opportunities for young people to explore different career pathways that align with their developing identities?

How are you helping young people navigate systemic barriers? What is your role in changing the systems that create barriers to their success?
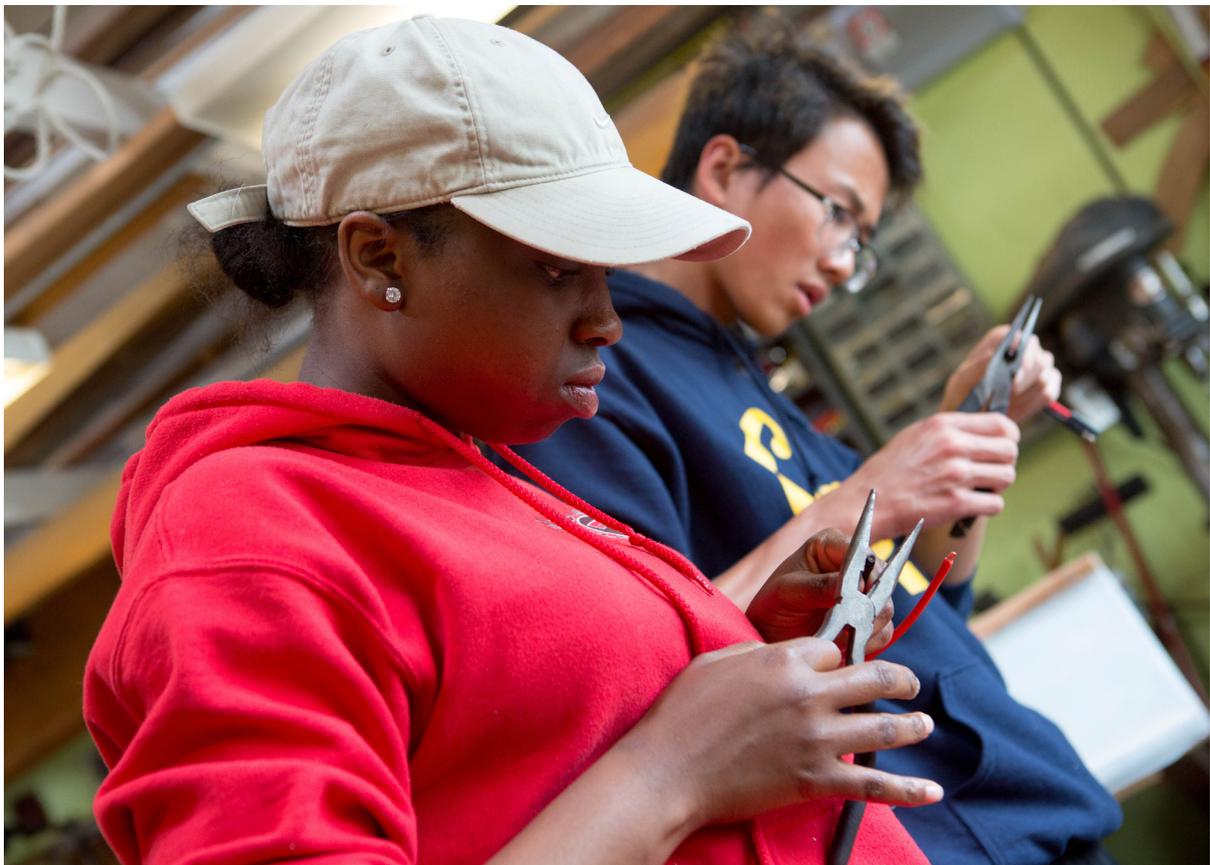
FINDING TWO

Young people believe connections and social capital are essential for navigating their career journeys— but often struggle to build them.

Far too many young people are engaging in efforts to become ready, but lack the relationships that provide entry points to, footholds in, and engagement with the world of work. Connections are important for overall wellbeing and instrumental for career advancement along a young person's journey.[34] Stronger affiliation with the people, institutions, and systems that constitute the world of work can increase young people's access to and engagement with the opportunities, crucial learning experiences (e.g., internships, apprenticeships), resources, and relationships that promote positive career outcomes.[35]

Young people know they cannot take their career journeys alone. They described striving and struggling to form connections that offer the social capital needed to navigate entry into the world of work and to advance their work-related goals.

Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Young people overwhelmingly recognized the power of interpersonal connections to broker access to important developmental and career-relevant opportunities needed to succeed in life and work. Research and theory refer to this as "social capital," which broadly represents the notion that "networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value" that benefit the members of those networks.[36] Youth development and career research indicate that social capital is associated with a range of academic, vocational, and psychosocial outcomes.[37]

Integration within, or access to, highly resourced networks can increase a young person's exposure to opportunities and relationships that can facilitate access to the world of work, promote sustainable connections to the labor market, and predict positive indicators of career success (e.g., income, hierarchical role, and job satisfaction).[38] However, few studies within the career and workforce development literature examine these concepts from the perspectives of young people themselves.

The young people in this report offered rich insights into the importance of social capital in their work lives. While young people rely on key close relationships (i.e. family, teachers, friends) as a starting point, those relationships have limits. Young people also need relationships that operate as bridges to more and better opportunities. For example, Jory, an alumnus of one of the participating career pathways programs, explained how young people benefit when they are embedded within industry-specific networks.

> They'll have more opportunities and possibilities than someone who doesn't know anyone who works in [a given industry]. So [I] definitely think "your network is your net worth," that's Jay-Z.
>
> JORY, 24, BLACK, FEMALE

Every young person, especially job-seekers and those preparing for the school-to-work transition, can benefit from developing connections along their journey and becoming integrated into high social capital networks—particularly social capital relevant to education and work.[39] Brock expanded on this concept:

> I think a lot of it feels like it boils down to, "it's not what you know, it's who you know." Upper-class kids have all these connections through their parents, through family members, and then they're able to—it's kind of this self-proven, self-replicating system of upper-echelon people in the social status, like know people and so they hire people they know, and then they have those that will hire people they know, and then they hire those people's kids, and then it just kind of perpetuates where it's, "Oh my dad worked here, I worked here, my grandpa worked here and hired this person." And so it's, I think that is frustrating.
>
> BROCK, 24, WHITE, MALE

Within the U.S., approximately half of all workers obtain employment through personal relationships. As Jory and Brock articulated, many young people, particularly those with less social and economic privilege, possess limited personal and professional network connections, which translates to difficulty in accessing quality opportunities, training, and jobs.[40]

One of the more widely examined angles of social capital is the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, although current perspectives suggest that this dichotomy provides a somewhat simplistic snapshot of the complexities of distributing resources and capital within and across groups.[41] The young people interviewed for this report offer examples of each form of capital creation and distribution, both of which have important value to young people as they construct their careers.
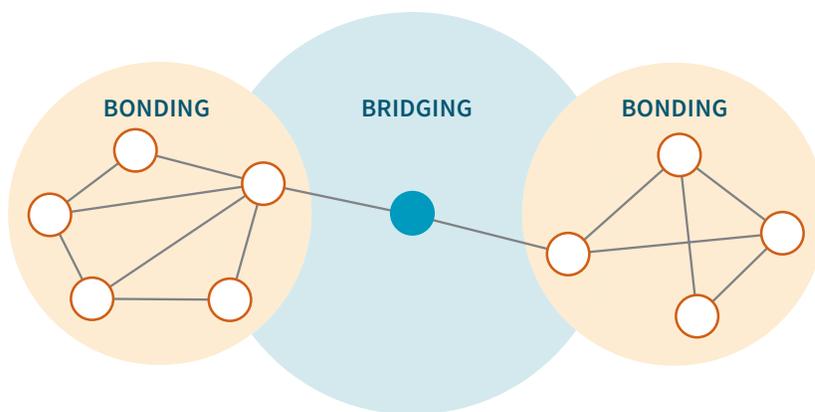
FIGURE 3: Bonding and Bridging

Jask, for example, pointed to the importance of **bonding capital**—the aggregation and distribution of resources within groups constituted by members who share common characteristics and some degree of homogeneity (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic stratum, physical location, educational background, professional discipline, etc.).

> We actually make friends, and it's a benefit of making a lot of friends that know construction because, like [participant] said, "The more friends you have in construction hands on, you can start a small business." And then from there that's where starting a small business is already something that's a goal in a lot of people's mind. Having your own business and be able to do something on your own. Not have to rely on somebody else to do it for you. I feel like that's a lot of people's goals.
>
> JASK, 25, HISPANIC, MALE

For Jask, relevant work experience provides an opportunity to strengthen connections with others *within* his construction community. As Jask described, these relationships can be further formalized as "friends" who may decide to share resources (e.g., cognitive expertise, physical resources, economic capital); establish common rules, roles, and norms regarding reciprocity; and pool sufficient assets required to start a small business.

Shadow described the crucial benefit of bonding capital for coping with adversity and managing an impromptu school-to-work transition. By tapping his and his father's existing network he was able to secure work to provide for their family in a time of need.

> My dad was really good at construction. He had a big chain of people that had [resources] that he worked for, the company he worked for, and once he got into prison, I knew a lot of people that he knew, so I just asked them for work and they gave me work. And it just grew from there.
>
> SHADOW, 24, HISPANIC, MALE

Many young people rely on the bonding capital available within their groups or communities, characterized by relatively strong ties, trust, and likeness. The potential for bonding capital to propel young people's careers may be limited, however, as the group may be constrained by its homogeneity—limiting access to novel resources, opportunity structures, and networks.[42]

Research and theory suggest that while bonding capital may be critical to "getting by," when it comes to "getting ahead," young people may require more substantive **bridging capital** that can broker access to new networks and diversify the resources available to advance one's career.[43] Importantly, bridging capital may be accessed by both

strong and weak ties within an individual's network,[G] though literature suggests that weak ties may be most critical for bridging capital. Strong ties may provide young people with the earliest instances of bridging capital that help young people grow beyond their own network limits. Jask, for example, illustrated his mother's efforts to grow her own professional network and bridge Jask into these new networks.

> " She works at the general hospital in Los Angeles, and she's a custodian…Her supervisors and the people she works with, she makes connections with the doctors. She had a therapist she's friends with there. She's friends with the police department, the sheriffs that work there. So she's made many connections there. She's like, "Oh, you want to work for the sheriffs? I have friends that could [help you]."
>
> JASK, 25, HISPANIC, MALE

Jask's story represents a form of both bonding and bridging capital, as the source (his mother) and recipient of the exchange (Jask) share resources within their family (bonding capital), yet the contacts, access, and opportunities that Jask derives from his mother's colleagues represent critical new bridges forged and shared by his mother that were unavailable within Jask's existing sphere of relationships. Both Jask and Shadow's examples underscore the notion that capital exchanges may blur the lines between bridging and bonding when applied to the complex relational dynamics of the real world.[44]

Because the bridging capacity of strong ties within young people's existing networks may be limited by the shared characteristics and homogeneity of their members, weak ties may be crucial for diversifying young people's networks.[45] This is a key value proposition for many work-based career pathways programs— explicitly building bridging capital, along with skills, by fostering new weak ties for young people within their prospective industries.

Quaz explained that his program was a chance to get connected to networks beyond the scope of what he was capable of accessing within his existing webs of relationships.

Panda's drawing highlights the benefits of both tapping existing relationships and building new connections to access opportunities at various points along her career path.

> " I know there's going to be a lot more amazing people here because other people are also getting into these high jobs, so it was like this is a bridge into that world of people who know a lot more, who have experience. So I saw it as an opportunity to get connected.
>
> QUAZ, 19, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

G Strong ties are closer or more enduring supportive relationships (e.g., parent) that may provide more diverse, robust, and/or consistent support. Weak ties represent less intimate or enduring relationships (e.g., coworker) but may provide unique or specialized supports unavailable in the young person's network of strong ties (e.g., new connections, novel resources); Granovetter, 2018

Jory further described the institutional bridging capital afforded by her career pathways program.

> " [Program] can connect with employers throughout the city so easily. So I guess that went on to college, my internships came through [program] and then even my first job post-grad. So it just makes sense because I don't have too many other connections outside of [program].
>
> JORY, 24, BLACK, FEMALE

In addition to connecting with new people at an individual level, she could build new relationships with companies and prospective employers through internships and jobs, unlocking new opportunities within the labor market.

Previous qualitative investigations with young people participating in youth development programs suggest that programs build social capital by intentionally connecting young people and non-family adults to facilitate supportive interactions and enhance youth trajectories by fostering intergenerational ties that offer new access to resources.[46] Logan provided further details about how programs can encourage exchanges of bridging capital through formalized structures, policies, and activities.

> " Being in [program], I get taken to these big conferences, where I talk to adults all day, who are dressed in business attire, and all associated with businesses, and stuff like that. Also, I think, I started working when I was 13, so I've been in a workplace environment, and meeting new people, and talking to people, and talking with adults, since I was 13, on a regular basis. I'm going to need to be super connected, through internships. And I think that's where you build that first connection, whether it's working for free at the [organization], and you just make a good first impression on somebody. And when you graduate, you are able to secure a job, and then you work your way up to where you want to be.
>
> LOGAN, 17, WHITE, MALE

Logan described the ways that conferences he attends through his program offer a bridge to new relationships and companies that can unlock previously inaccessible opportunities. The young people in *Finding a Way Forward* referenced a number of other programmatic structures that foster bridging capital such as networking events, job fairs, college tours and access activities, formal internship placements and work-based learning experiences, and even opportunities to build relationships with peers that possess diverse bridging capital.

Logan's example highlights how, from the young person's perspective, these new bridging opportunities operate in concert with existing readiness skills (e.g., networking, social emotional skills) and bonding capital accrued within the young person's existing network (e.g., previous jobs, existing contacts). Together, these allow young people to "work your way up to where you want to be," integrating experiences and networks into an overall career journey. The young people involved in this study make clear that to advance along this journey, the valued connections and capital that exist within a young person's life and community must be complemented with new ties that can extend into new opportunities.

Building and Sustaining Connections

But how do young people build and sustain the connections that can grow their social networks? In addition to discussing how connections to people, programs, and networks help them achieve their goals, young people discuss a range of relationship qualities that provide a sense of emotional and psychological connectedness to others. What young people say matters to them can offer practical insights for adults and communities seeking to help build new relationships that can help young people along their career journeys. Qualities young people highlight include safety and acceptance; communication; trust, credibility, and reliability; closeness and intimacy; mutuality; shared perspectives and experiences (e.g., values, interests, goals, solidarity); temporal characteristics (e.g., consistency, frequency, and duration of relationship); and a belief that the other person cares about them and is invested in their growth and wellbeing. *(See the code counts in Appendix D for more detail.)*

Jory and Pinky, two alumni of a career pathways program, noted that the consistency, frequency, and duration of interaction with relationships can shape connectedness. They also described the program strategies that make it easy for them to stay connected.

> [Our program] just emails us. And they make it easy for us to just stay connected because there's so many events and like just sign up, come through.
>
> JORY, 24, BLACK, FEMALE

> I'm more of a person who kind of need checking. Like in order to stay in my circle or something I need you to do follow ups with me or just reach out to me. And they do that, like they will send a newsletter every month. So just staying in the loop in my life.
>
> PINKY, 22, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

Their dialogue highlights that a range of tactics from relatively low-investment strategies (e.g., email, newsletter) to more intensive strategies (e.g., in-person events) can promote "staying in the loop" in a young person's life. Several young people noted that small, consistent interactions with caring adults, such as a daily conversation with a teacher, can deepen bonds and create a sense of trust.

Similarly, Oreo affirmed the power of consistent interactions to foster a deeper sense of connectedness.

> My program coordinator was [name] when I was a part of the program, and we used to always have our one-on-one chats. That'd be at least once or twice a month just to check in with each other and see how we're doing. When we had chats, not only did she talk to me about how's work going, do I feel comfortable with my job site, but she also talked to me about college stuff.
>
> OREO, 19, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Oreo also discussed many key aspects of connectedness that emerged through the data analysis—for example, mutuality, consistency, and coordination among multiple sources. This quote describes just one adult she has stayed in touch with throughout her journey. She also described inviting key adults from her career pathways program and school to her slam poetry performances, thereby coordinating and nurturing connections across multiple contexts of her life.

> I'm still very well in contact with all of the [program] employees, including my program coordinator. And I actually, even whenever I have performances I invite them to come and be a part of the audience, which is actually amazing because I'm not a part of the program anymore. But yet still the fact that they care about the things that I'm doing outside of [program] and outside of college. Not only [program] employees come in, also some of my high school teachers actually come and see me too.
>
> OREO, 19, HISPANIC, FEMALE

She explained that their attendance conveys a sense of perceived investment in her growth and wellbeing as a whole person and that the consistency of these interactions has fostered enduring connections that have persisted beyond her formal enrollment in these settings.

In addition to some of the key relational qualities discussed above, Hazelnut described several characteristics that typify connectedness within relationships across her life.

> If you're not comfortable with the people, they don't make you feel comfortable, you're not going to be connected at all. It's just having maybe the same mindset or the same goals and having that mutual support with one another, it makes you be connected and that communication between people that you're able to, because you can communicate or connect with anyone, but what's the point if it's always going to be disagreements or arguments? It's more of a reciprocal connection.
>
> HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Hazelnut touched on the importance of relationships with a basic level of safety and comfort, shared perspectives, communication, and most notably, a strong sense of mutuality—which describes the joint participation, power, and purpose within a relationship.[47]

Research on mentoring relationships suggests that simply having a relationship may not be enough. Rather, high-quality, satisfying relationships—those that exhibit characteristics such as mutuality, attachment, trust, respect, communication, autonomy, and a deeper understanding of the whole person beyond the immediate context of their roles—are a much more robust predictor of positive work and career development outcomes.[48]

reflection

How are you helping young people leverage the relationships they already have?

How are you helping young people build new relationships across their lives?

How are you helping young people build industry-specific connections that can expand their professional networks?

FINDING THREE
Young people's work and life roles are not siloed from one another; they require a multi-dimensional, whole-person approach to support.

While young people's connections can broker access to new opportunities, support derived from relationships gives them an array of resources to meet their needs throughout their career journeys.

> When you make connections with the right people, you'll be supported by them and sooner or later they'll make you be ready for whatever is next because you know you have that support from those connections so that everything ties back.
>
> HAZELNUT, 17, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Hazelnut made an explicit connection between the value of social capital ("connections with the right people") and social support ("you'll be supported by them"). The young people involved in this study urgently assert that the support they need is not limited to their work lives. They offer a clear call to action for their communities and the world of work to support the whole person for "whatever is next," as Hazelnut says.

Supportive relationships are critical—yet often undervalued—assets that drive positive youth and career development.[49] Social support offers key developmental resources (e.g., psychological, material, social) that can buffer the impact of adversity; promote wellbeing and a range of positive behavioral, academic, and career outcomes;[50] and, as Hazelnut asserted, advance one's readiness.

Supporting the Whole Person

The young people in *Finding a Way Forward* described relying on relationships at and outside the workplace to provide the array of resources they need to take their next steps. Joy explained the crucial role that employers can play in recognizing their employees as whole people with full and complicated lives.

> " I was speaking to a CEO of a company one day in a convention and he told me…"The best workers are people who put their professional lives first. They do not bring their home life." He said, "Those are the people that I promote. Those are the people that I know are loyal to the company."
>
> So I told him, "A person like me who has a child and if my child gets sick, he's not allowed to go to daycare. He can't be in there for 24 hours." And I said, "Imagine if I didn't have any expenses to pay a sitter because it's last minute. Imagine if my car broke down or whatever." I said, "We're human." I said, "Would you not promote that person even if I stayed late after certain hours, even if I was the top performer? You still have to take into consideration that personal side that relates to the professional side."
>
> And he told me, "No, that's not how it works."
>
> JOY, 25, BLACK, FEMALE

For Joy, her role as a mother does not stop upon entering the office, yet she highlighted the institutional, structural, and cultural discrimination and inequities that reinforce unrealistic expectations of employees to divorce their work from their broader lives. Joy contrasted this against a profound turning point along her journey, explaining that the program she enrolled in offered empathy for her complex situation and specific support to help her succeed. As a young mother trying to gain a foothold in the world of work, the robust array of broad supports that her career pathways program provided helped stabilize demands across her life so that she could pursue work-related priorities.

Nely, also a young single mother, affirmed the need for flexibility, unrelenting support, and tailored resources as she managed motherhood, economic struggles, and several abusive relationships. She described how, in addition to these robust, broad supports, she also benefited greatly from the career-specific supports and experiences provided in her career pathways program.

> The connection to the staff at [my program] has been something that has helped me figure out what I want in life and what I'm capable of doing. Something that I never actually had in life that I have had somebody tell me, you have these type of skills in you, and joining the construction training program showed me a lot of that, you know, that I have a lot of skills in me. I could do a lot. Me as a woman, I could do stuff that I never thought I would be able to.
>
> NELY, 23, HISPANIC, FEMALE

Joy and Nely highlighted a resounding message from the participants in *Finding a Way Forward* that young people, particularly young people confronted with significant adversity along their journeys, require a diverse array of integrated supports, including resources to cope with adversity and stressors across their lives as well as more specialized career-specific supports.

Utilizing Multiple Types of Support

Young people described benefiting from instrumental, emotional, appraisal, and informational support that enables them to respond to general life circumstances and to meet more targeted, career-specific needs. Together, these types of support can enable a young person to get the unique combination of resources needed to advance their careers.[51]

Types of Support

Young people need an array of supports that help them navigate their careers while also managing their lives outside of work.*

INSTRUMENTAL
Provide tangible goods, services, or help, such as money, household goods, transportation, childcare; assistance accessing health care; help with cooking, cleaning, shopping; repairs, tools/equipment, etc.

EMOTIONAL
Enable sharing of feelings; expression of experiences/concerns; demonstrate sympathy; and caring acceptance

APPRAISAL
Offer positive feedback that someone can use for self-evaluation; such as affirming a young person's competence by pointing out specific strengths, or providing constructive criticism

INFORMATIONAL
Provide information about resources; provide advice for problem solving; or guidance about effective course of action

*Adapted from Center for Promise, 2015; Wills & Shinar, 2000

INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT

Many of the young people included in this study described a need for instrumental support that helps provide basic needs that enable day-to-day work as well as investments in career development. This type of support includes offering time in the form of rides, childcare, or task support as well as economic and material items like money, shelter, food, tuition/fees, or academic supplies. Joy shared how her father's personal sacrifices helped manage a difficult transitional period as she balanced multiple caregiving, occupational, and educational roles with limited resources.

> And my dad, he really stretched his pockets to help me do the things that I needed to do, because he barely makes his money himself. But, he knew I needed gas to drive to places, he knew I needed diapers for my son. …the only government assistance I have is food stamps, so I don't really get child support from his dad. I don't get other stuff. So my dad was taking care of three extra people on income meant for one. So I really appreciate him for that.
>
> JOY, 25, BLACK, FEMALE

In addition to support from her father, Joy explained how her career pathways program provided stipends, housing and transportation resources, and childcare assistance that enabled her to participate in programming by stabilizing her basic needs.

> And then, not even long after that [a program staff member] called me back and she was like…"we called the child care assistance on your behalf, and they're willing to just accept you into the program before you start school. We went the extra mile and wrote a letter and told them that they needed to accept you." From that moment, I had never felt so grateful and so hopeful in my life that no matter what, there's always a way if someone is there for you, if someone has your back.
>
> And ever since that day, I showed up here every day on time...I became certified first time around; I didn't have to retest. I dedicated myself, because I didn't want to let them down. And I told them that, I said, "You don't know how much hope you put into my life by that small action of just taking care of that one priority that I needed to succeed."
>
> JOY, 25, BLACK, FEMALE

By tapping into support from staff members, programmatic resources, and assistance provided by her father, Joy was able to coordinate support from multiple sources in her life that met her unique needs. Many participants described benefiting from similar institutionalized supports (e.g., policies, scholarships or grants, compensation and benefits) associated with their schools, programs, and companies.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Experiences of trust, intimacy, empathy, and feeling heard helped participants cope with barriers and fostered their emotional wellbeing. Emotional support in the form of listening, validation, companionship, and intimacy can help young people share their worries and feel accepted for who they are as they confront challenges throughout their lives, education, and careers.[52] Research indicates that many young people are especially likely to receive emotional support from peers and family.[53]

> " I had the support of my mother to say, "If you're safe, if you're happy, and if you're okay and you're doing what you want to do at the end of the day, I love you." Just having that whole support and making her proud is kind of my push and my goals, really, because I know for her, all she really wants for me and my siblings is to move out, be financially stable, and be able to take care of ourselves so that she can go ahead and breathe, relax, and retire.

CICI, 20, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE
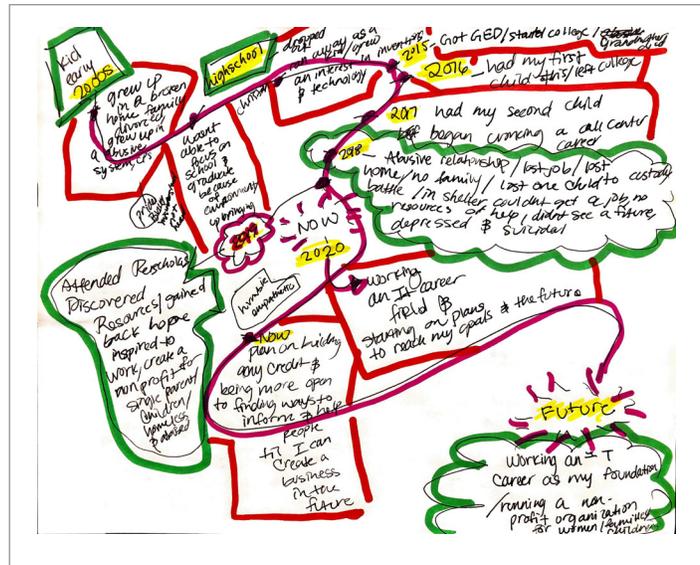
Joy's drawing highlights the value of support and resources to cope with adversity at multiple points throughout her journey.

CiCi's story illustrates how strong emotional support can provide the foundation from which young people find the strength to pursue their career and academic goals in the face of adversity experienced throughout one's life.

APPRAISAL SUPPORT

Along the twists and turns of their journeys, young people described the immense value of appraisal support, which encapsulates the guidance and feedback provided by trusted sources within a young person's life. Euless reflected on the appraisal support that helped him navigate burn-out during a time when he was managing full-time work and school:

> " I didn't really have a social life and I feel like that maybe became…this depressed stage just because all I did was wake up, go to class, come home, go to work. I had time for nothing basically…I was just thinking, "Do I really even need to go to school?" But then I had a mentor…actually one of my older cousins…because he went through the same thing when he was in school, and he made me realize that, "Yeah, you can work any job, but you won't ever be as happy as you would if you actually went to school and got an actual career." So I think that pushed me in the right direction…and just urged me to finish school and start a career.

EULESS, 27, ASIAN AMERICAN, MALE

Euless illustrates the importance of agency in making one's own career choices, while also receiving tailored guidance on the most effective strategies to achieve one's goals.

As participants' narratives demonstrate, appraisal support can be provided through strong ties such as family members, peers, or other members within one's community, however, guidance may be particularly valuable from those with shared experience or expertise in career and workforce development such as teachers, counselors, or college advisors.[54]

INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT

The participants in this report also described the valuable information they receive from various sources that provide knowledge and insight used to navigate various career and life decisions along their journeys. Jask, for example, explained that he benefited greatly from information provided by more senior employees and mentors throughout his early work experiences.

> I remember this one guy I was talking to like, "Hey, how do you get into a job like this? Did you go to college? Did you go to university?" He's like, "Oh, we went to a trade school for like two years, and that's what we did, finished it, and got in contact with [the company], and I'm here." I'm like, "Wow." I was like, "So it's that simple." He made it seem simple. They were showing me the ropes, like showing how to read the monitors. I couldn't go inside what they're doing because that's hands on. But they were like, "You'll get that as the job goes."
>
> JASK, 25, HISPANIC, MALE

For Jask, this information offered by supportive colleagues on the job provided a deeper understanding of the unique pathways and milestones necessary to realize similar success within his industry.

Research suggests that high-quality career information is a critical component of effective career development interventions.[55] Many young people, however, may lack access to formal informational supports such as career counselors, resources, and technologies (e.g., career information systems) that can provide such information, relying instead on information provided by relationships throughout their webs of support.

Cultivating Support Across Contexts

In order to access the array of whole-person supports they need, young people emphasized that they turn to relationships across different areas of their lives. Consistent with the Webs of Support perspective, a single supportive relationship is often insufficient; caring relationships must be cultivated throughout multiple contexts of a young person's life to optimize developmental outcomes.[56] The young people in this report reported receiving support from family, peers, school, community, career pathways programs, and work settings. *(See Appendix D.)*

> Definitely my friends. I know a lot of people, from just being in the same city for my entire life. And knowing that people I've met are there behind the scenes, and even if we are out of touch, or I don't talk to them everyday that I can be like, "Hey, how are you?" And like, "This is what's going on," and I can talk to them. And my

Nadia's drawing highlights the multiple sources of supportive relationships including family, friends, mentors, and other writers that have shaped her career path and thinking.

family's a really big part of it, and then [my program]. I know I can go to my teachers—I know that I can go to both the teachers, whether they're the junior and senior, or the freshman and sophomore, I know that I can

talk to them, and be like, "Hey, I need help with this," or, "I'm really thinking about this option for this." And knowing that I do have that support, whether it's my peers, or my teachers and my family.

VIOLET, 16, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

Violet named individuals drawn from at least five distinct areas of her life (e.g., friends, community, family, career pathways program, school) and underscored the ways in which she exercises her own agency and judgment to navigate these relationships throughout her journey.

> **Young people need an array of supports that help navigate their careers in the context of their lives.**

Young people also note that the type or strength of support provided by relationships within a given context may vary, as does the perceived importance of any specific person. CiCi, for example, describes her teacher as a valuable anchor within her high school who plays multiple roles, provides multiple supports, and helps many students translate an aspirational directive to "go to college" into an achievable reality.

> High schools are like, "Go to college, go to college, go to college" but they really don't give you the resources, until I met [Coach]. Now, she is a phenomenal woman that works at [my high school]. She's the coach of the girls' basketball team, she's a teacher. She teaches the SAT prep class, she runs the [student-athlete] club that's at that school, and I have seen so many kids lately get four and five scholarships and acceptances to different colleges because she advocates for them. But not every school has her. Not every school has a person that's going to care about you like she does.
>
> So it's just hard, because you have those one in a million people in those public city schools getting paid crap to teach these kids who say "Listen, you can have much more than what [this city] is offering you if you work hard and know what you want to do." It was one counselor for the whole 350 twelfth grade class of my senior year, for the seniors. One guidance counselor.
>
> CICI, 20, MULTIRACIAL, FEMALE

Though support may come from a variety of sources, anchor relationships like the one CiCi described provide a critical role within an effective web of support.[57] Ideally, young people have access to anchors across all developmental contexts. As CiCi explained, however, for many young people, their career journeys are made harder by systemic barriers and constraints.

Shadow further highlights the myriad social and community-level factors that affect access to resources like good schools, supportive adults, or neighborhood programs that can facilitate a young person's early career journey.

> Like I'm going to put it to you, like [our city], parts of [our city], they're not going to put a lot of money into a community where there's a lot of gang banging, there's a lot of violence. They're not going to put enough money into that area, not enough support for that area. It's harder for the people in that community to like come out of things, stuff like that. There's not a lot of role models there that could help you, like other, high-end communities where there's better teachers, better support, like programs, like all that type of thing. I feel like that's what we lack in our communities that we don't have the support in our neighborhoods and our schools and programs and stuff.
>
> SHADOW, 24, HISPANIC, MALE

Shadow described one aspect of a point that many participants in *Finding a Way Forward* urgently assert: that supportive relationships, institutions, and communities are widely inaccessible to many young people,[58] yet critically important in the struggle to grow their readiness for and connection to the world of work.

reflection

How are you providing an array of resources that support the whole person within and outside of the workplace?

How is your community or program providing a variety of instrumental, emotional, informational, and appraisal supports for young people?

What sources or relationships are the young people in your life drawing from to access the supports they need to succeed? How can you help young people strengthen and diversify their sources of support?

IMPLICATIONS

The young people whose voices infuse this report offer a compelling vision for what it means to become ready, connected, and supported along their journeys through today's rapidly changing employment landscape. Despite the adversity many of them have faced, they remain persistent and resilient in ways that the coming years will require of all workers.

The voices in this study make clear that becoming ready, connected, and supported is a journey that consists of relational and developmental processes that involve all aspects of a young person's life and identity. Creating empowering pathways for young people toward decent and sustainable work, therefore, requires comprehensive, youth-centered strategies.[59]

Overall, the findings in this study point toward five areas for the field's attention. Each of these has implications for research, policy, and practice.

- ☑ **Adopt a whole-person approach to career and workforce development.**

- ☑ **Dismantle systemic barriers to workforce development and participation.**

- ☑ **Support diverse pathways to and through the world of work.**

- ☑ **Enable young people to leverage existing connections and develop new ones.**

- ☑ **Encourage lifelong learning as a career mindset.**

The "take action" examples throughout this section highlight how some organizations and systems are exemplifying aspects of these recommendations.

Adopt a whole-person approach to career and workforce development.

Traditionally, career and workforce development systems have separated skills from identities, work lives from personal lives, school from work, and individuals from contexts. This does not honor the way that young people experience the world. A youth-centered perspective has the potential to unify these fragmented efforts through holistic, interdisciplinary approaches that are deeply grounded in young people's experiences.

Adopting a whole person approach to career and workforce development entails diversifying the tools used to identify and evaluate candidates; valuing a broader profile of life experiences and identities; and ultimately shifting cultural norms about which skills, educational credentials, and professional opportunities are valued in the market.

This is even more urgent now, given that the disparate impacts of COVID-19 risk exacerbating inequitable professional opportunities and outcomes, particularly for young people of color who are un- or under-employed. Responding to this crisis will require a deep and sustained commitment from all parties in carrying forward the understanding that supporting young people's career aspirations is inseparable from understanding the full range of who they are and the strengths and experiences they bring to their workplaces.

take action

Whole-person Program Approaches

- ☑ The American Job Centers reauthorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 provide a range of tools, resources, and services to personalize support for unemployed workers.

- ☑ The programs in the present study—Jobs for America's Graduates, Per Scholas, Urban Alliance, Year Up, and Youth Build—each provide intensive workforce development approaches that extend beyond skills, embrace the unique individual and community context, and provide an array of tailored wrap-around support services.

- ☑ Recent research by the Center for Promise highlights whole-person approaches to social, emotional, and academic development in school and out-of-school-time settings.

Dismantle systemic barriers to workforce development and participation.

The shifting world of work has further unveiled the unjust truth that the American Dream remains elusive for far too many young people. Participants in this study named some of the structural barriers young people face along their journeys, such as racism in educational settings or the workplace; segregation of their communities from resources and opportunities; and a dearth of supportive structures such as child care or transportation that enable consistent commitments to work. Creating a different professional reality for young people facing these adversities, particularly during a global pandemic, requires engagement across social systems.

Decision makers interested in youth employment need to simultaneously address these institutional and community-level factors in addition to supporting individual-level actions to increase youth employment.[60] Workplace and education policies that promote equity, address systemic barriers, and honor people's work-life intersections, such as paid internships, flexible working formats, robust family leave, and tailored supports or benefits that extend beyond traditional offerings can create more equitable work environments and outcomes (e.g., reducing hiring and income disparities).

Any policies or practices meant to serve marginalized youth must explicitly and directly address the impacts of structural racism on employment opportunities. While there is a groundswell of interest in the effects of racism on young people's career journeys and prospects, young people themselves are too rarely looked to as leaders in those conversations. The participants in *Finding a Way Forward* demonstrate that they are talented, capable, and necessary partners in addressing the root causes of racial inequity in the world of work.

take action

Racial Justice

☑ Race Forward has multiple resources for organizations and employers interested in addressing racial injustice, including a readiness assessment.

☑ The National Skills Coalition published Roadmap for Racial Equity, explicitly focused on workforce development and citing equity-focused policy and practice examples.

☑ Emerging research and technologies, coupled with innovative labor policies and practices, can diversify how companies and sectors identify candidates, moving beyond the traditional focus on education and experience to promote a whole-person approach that centers equity.

Support diverse pathways to and through the world of work.

The young people in this report make clear that they deeply value postsecondary education, that the traditional four-year college pathway is not the right path for all careers, and that even their efforts to access other forms of education (e.g., community college, apprenticeships) are rife with barriers. Young people need more avenues to access the right path for them with more and better linkages between these pathways so that they can make adjustments along the way. Communities can provide empowering contexts for young people by providing diverse pathways, school-to-work pipelines, and workforce development systems that afford multiple "on-ramps and off-ramps," are responsive to young people's developing needs, and accommodate each young person's unique process of becoming ready, connected, and supported.

take action

Diverse Pathways

☑ The Integrated Career Pathways Model developed through a partnership among the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services; the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014; and the resulting guidance and toolkits for programs and communities offer examples of these lessons being enacted at the federal and state level.

☑ The American Association of Community Colleges Pathways Project, focused on implementing and scaling career pathways models through U.S. community colleges, offers an insightful national roadmap for creating diverse pathways for young people.

☑ Organizations like JFF, YouthBuild USA, Year Up, and many others have published frameworks and case studies for organizations, educational leaders, and policy makers interested in supporting alternative pathways and applying a youth-centered understanding of readiness to both policy and practice.

Enable young people to leverage existing connections and develop new ones.

The young people in this study demonstrate that one's career journey is fundamentally shaped by the people to whom one is connected and the places where those connections are forged. Their narratives offer detailed descriptions of the quality of their connections with both peers and adults, the social capital that these individuals and groups offer them, and the related support that this capital provides. Infusing their networks with sustained relationships and supports is one critical and scalable way to maintain young people's inclusion in the world of work.

Young people already have many of these supports. They name family members, teachers, coaches, social workers, peers, colleagues, managers, and others across the many contexts of their lives, noting that each of these relationships plays a role in their wellbeing and their career advancement. While young people recognize the cultural and social capital that is available close to home, they also emphasize the difficulties of building professional networks that can bridge them to new opportunities within and beyond their home communities, explicitly naming race and poverty as barriers to opportunity.[61] Young people's career prospects are stronger when the adults around them value the role that both bridging and bonding social capital can play, and help them nurture existing connections and forge new ones.

take action

Enduring Relationships

☑ Previous Center for Promise publications highlight exemplar programs such as Homeboy Industries, Cafe Momentum, and several programs from the present study, describing how they embed multiple forms and sources of support throughout their programs.

☑ Organizations like MENTOR, as well as research and practice models like Search Institute's Developmental Relationships, provide a range of additional tools, resources, and tips for helping young people build enduring relationships.

☑ Helping young people map their webs of support can also be a useful strategy for identifying existing relationships and strategically building new ones.[H]

H Flanagan et al., 2020; Pufall Jones, Flanagan, Zaff, McClay, Varga, Rollock, Hynes, & Cole, 2017

Encourage lifelong learning as a career mindset.

Young people recognize that in an ever-changing world of work, the traditional labor market structures and dynamics that once supported relatively predictable pathways to mobility for previous generations have eroded—leaving instead an uncertain, unclear, and unsteady path forward for present and future workers.[62]

The non-linear work lives and career paths imposed by an inequitable and changing labor landscape require that young people rely increasingly on an integrated identity and strong sense of adaptability to manage the many transitions they will surely encounter.[63] Continued adaptation means that young people's work lives must be grounded in a commitment to lifelong learning—an "apprenticeship" mindset like the one Shadow described:

> " The way I see it, like going through life now, and the fact that I've gone through a lot of experiences, I see everything as an apprenticeship, a learning experience. Before you become an expert, you have to be an apprentice. You have to learn...It all comes down to school, education, and like the mindset.
>
> SHADOW, 24, HISPANIC, MALE

A lifelong learning approach can position workers to maintain and grow their competitive value, keep pace with shifting market demands, and capitalize on new opportunities to shape "how the world sees you, how the world's going to define you" (Alex, 23, African American, Male).

take action

Apprenticeship Models

☑ JFF's framework for high quality apprenticeship models provides guidance for cultivating effective apprenticeship programs.

☑ Organizations such as CareerWiseColorado, Achieving the Dream, Gateway to College, Urban Alliance, and early college and innovative high school models such as P-TECH and Big Picture Learning are notable examples of local, state, and national efforts to raise the profile and possibility of embedding apprenticeship opportunities along young people's career pathways.

What the young people in this research make clear is that, in addition to lifelong learning, young people and communities must engage in a lifelong approach to cultivating and sustaining relationships that foster the connections and support needed to navigate an ever-changing world of work.

> " Even though you might feel like you're failing or your life is hard, there's always the sunshine. The horizon is always there.
>
> JASK, 25, HISPANIC, MALE

Jask's comment encapsulates the hopeful spirit of the 65 young people whose striving, struggles, and successes are highlighted in this report. Young people want their worth to be recognized, their growth to be supported, and their contributions to make a difference for their families and communities. The world of work will be better with them in it.

ENDNOTES

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28. Albaek, Kinn, & Milde, 2018; Denby, 2016; Stokas, 2015
29. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Lerner, Freund, Stefanis, & Habermas, 2001; Wiese, Freund, & Baltes, 2000
30. e.g., Camara, O'Connor, Mattern, & Hanson, 2015; Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Wright, 2006; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019
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APPENDIX A
Methodology

Finding a Way Forward is part of a broader study of young people's career development, conducted as a part of America's Promise Alliance's YES Project. This report explores a portion of the collected data to address the following two specific research questions within this broader research study:

- How do young people describe what it means to become ready, connected, and supported to reach their employment goals?

- How do contextual factors, including the barriers young people encounter and conditions that help them cope, shape their journey to becoming ready, connected, and supported?

To answer these questions, the research team from the Center for Promise conducted 10 group interviews, each including about six young people and lasting about two hours. The team engaged a total of 65 young people at these five career and workforce development settings:

- Year Up (Baltimore, MD)

- Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates (Cedar Rapids, IA)

- Urban Alliance (Chicago, IL)

- YouthBuild (Compton, CA; Los Angeles Area)

- Per Scholas (Dallas, TX)

These sites were chosen based on their commitment to providing high-quality career and workforce development programming for young people between ages 16 and 24, as well as their geographic, programmatic, and youth demographic characteristics.

See Appendix B for an overview of each site's characteristics.

Data Collection

The data collection procedures for this study employed a multilevel nested sampling design. The multilevel design facilitates the examination of phenomena at different levels of study (e.g., program, group, individual; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, 2014; Qureshi, 2018). The nested design entails subsampling within higher levels of the overall sample with the intention of refining ideas related to the phenomenon of interest (e.g., career readiness). In this instance, youth-serving programs were selected, within which group interview participants were subsampled; subsequently, individual interview participants were subsampled from the pool of group interview participants to provide more in-depth exploration of the young people's career development experiences. Full information on the group and individual samples as well as the procedures are included below.

Site Selection

Participants were recruited through five career pathways programs in five U.S. cities: Baltimore, MD; Cedar Rapids, IA; Chicago, IL; Dallas, TX; and Los Angeles, CA. Program selection was conducted through an intensity sampling[i] approach that included a Request for Information process, which enabled the researchers to identify a collection of sites best suited for participation in the project based on a number of characteristics about the sites, their work, and the young people they serve. Intensity sampling is a useful approach for identifying information-rich sources (e.g., exemplar sources; Damon & Colby, 2013) with the goal of examining cases that are likely to manifest a given phenomenon, idea, or question with

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i   Intensity sampling is a non-probability, purposive, sampling strategy, which identifies information-rich cases (e.g., "intense," although not highly unusual, extreme, or aberrant) likely to provide illustrative insights about the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2014).

the purpose of informing deeper understandings of the topic of inquiry. For example, in the present study, career and workforce development programs were recruited based on an assumption that the young people participating in these programs are uniquely positioned to speak about the various factors confronting young people entering the labor force; first-hand experiences engaging with the labor force (e.g., seeking, participating, disconnecting, and/or reconnecting with work); and the nature of various career development processes germane to a study on youth career development. In selecting sites, the team considered the following factors:

- **Youth-supporting organizations or programs.** The research team sought a mix of programs that embody a variety of approaches to career and workforce development programming. This variety in program models seeks to improve confidence that findings would not be limited to or influenced by a single program approach, but rather examined as they manifest across similar, yet unique career and workforce development settings.

- **Service to young people ages 16-24.** The research team sought to identify programs that primarily serve young people between ages 16-24, as this age range is consistent with definitions characterizing "youth employment" policy and practice according to federal labor market data and policy conventions, as well as large portions of the career and workforce development focused non-profit sector.

- **Community and program demographics.** The research team considered the demographics of each program and the community it is situated in. The Center for Promise sought to get a demographic range and also paid particular attention to understudied populations.

- **Geographic location.** The research team considered geographic location, keeping in mind that while this study is not a representative sample, it is a national sample. The Center for Promise therefore selected sites with consideration toward a balanced collection of locations, including a range of post-industrial cities from the coasts, the South, and the Midwest.

Group Interview Participant Selection

The authors conducted 10 group interviews with 65 young people across the five sites. Group interviews included approximately six participants per group and facilitators conducted two groups at each site, allowing for a collection of participants within and across sites with a diverse representation of life and work experiences. Within each selected program, young people were recruited to participate through a convenience sampling strategy (Patton, 2014). Program administrators and staff in each of the five programs assisted the research team in recruiting young people to participate in group interviews to discuss the life experiences, both in and outside of the program, that have shaped their career perspectives and paths. Each participant was provided a $40 gift card for participation in the group interview

Individual Interview Participant Selection

A total of 23 young people participated in semi-structured, in-depth, individual follow-up interviews. Individual interview participants were recruited from the group interviews through a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2014). Participants who demonstrated a willingness and ability to share their experiences within the group interview were invited to participate in individual interviews. Moreover, the research team sought to recruit a subsample of individual participants with a balanced collective diversity of identities, experiences, and perspectives.

Measure/Protocol

Each group interview was facilitated by two members of the research team. The research team consisted of a Senior Research Scientist, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Doctoral Student in Applied Human Development, and an Advisor for Youth Engagement from the Center for Promise. Each member of the research team has extensive training and expertise conducting applied positive youth development research related to psychology, education, and career development. Each member of the research team also has experience and training facilitating youth engagement in group settings. The first author served as a co-facilitator for all groups across the five sites and a second member of the research team served as co-facilitator on a rotating basis.

Each group began with a brief introduction, outlining the purpose and expectations for the group interview. Participants also completed the informed consent process and a brief demographic information worksheet. Participants were instructed to select a pseudonym of their choice and, along with the facilitators, participants engaged in several group exercises to engender trust, establish norms, and build connection and comfort among participants (e.g. Pufall Jones & Zaff, 2017). Moreover, several "brain race" activities were conducted wherein participants brainstormed what work and careers meant to them, as well as what ready, connected, and supported meant to them.

Once rapport was established, facilitators then asked the young person to draw a 'timeline' of their life and career path as a priming exercise for considering the various events, experiences, and influences on their career development to date. The exercise was introduced by a prompt, which served as a broad "central question" (Creswell, 2009), inviting youth to share their views of work and careers, what it means to be ready, connected, and supported in reaching their goals, and how these concepts have manifest in their own lives to date. Participants were invited to share their story with the group in the form of a brief narrative.

Building from these individual narratives, the group was invited to engage in collective discussion to explore various conceptions of work and careers, readiness, connectedness, and the importance of supportive relationships. Facilitators closed the group interviews by inviting participants' reflections and thoughts about the session, distributing the incentives, and offering debrief forms with resources that they might find helpful.

Individual in-depth follow up interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the authors and adapted from the group interview protocol. The individual follow-up interviews aimed to provide participants an opportunity to expand on what they shared in the group interview, providing finer detail about their perspective and experiences within a more intimate setting than a group format provides. The semi-structured nature of the interview allows researchers to explore common sets of questions across participants, while also enabling participants to construct and articulate their perspectives freely without the constraints imposed by highly structured interview formats (e.g., Spencer, 2007; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This format also permitted the interviewers to employ facilitating techniques (e.g., paraphrasing, probing, reflection, clarification, summarizing, etc.) to elicit further information and deepen understandings where relevant (Merriam, & Tisdell 2015).

The same facilitators who conducted the group interviews also conducted the individual interviews, so that participants could share within a more established relationship. The authors hoped that this rapport would help elicit trust, authenticity, and openness during the interview. Attention and acknowledgement of interview conditions is critical in framing the relational context created between interviewer and interviewee within the interview and offer important benefits to the descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity of results (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Following the methodologies specified by Creswell (2009) and Miles & Huberman (1994, 2002), individual interviews began with a central question inviting participants to "pick up where we left off (from the group interview), filling in your story so that we can better understand your path up to this point, the role of work or careers in your life to date, and the experiences or influences that have shape your path and perspective." Although specific language of subquestions varied across interviews (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994, 2002), target areas of inquiry within each narrative included understanding the young person's view on the purpose of work, their perspective on what it means to be ready, connected, and supported, and the various experiences or influences within the young person's life that shaped these views. Facilitators also recorded detailed field notes throughout the site visits to support later analysis.

Data Analysis

Group and individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a third party transcription service. Data was analyzed using QSR NVivo12. Analyses in the present study were conducted primarily at the group interview level. The individual interviews were used for purposes of triangulating the coding scheme, analysis, and findings to enhance confidence that the analysis accurately represented the data provided by participants and are referenced in select instances to provide rich examples of themes or codes throughout the report (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Flick, 2004).

The authors employed a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to data analysis. Phenomenology is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants, and thus highlights the individual's voice and meaning-making processes. A phenomenological approach is used when researchers want to understand a common meaning for a certain phenomenon in people's lives. In this instance we wanted to build our understanding of what **ready, connected, and supported** means to the participating young people and how their life experiences contribute to their views on work and their own career development.

Through a phenomenological analysis of narrative data,[J] the authors sought to:

- Strengthen concepts and theoretical understandings of ready, connected, and supported through the identification of recurrent patterns (e.g., phenomenological; Huberman & Miles, 2002).

- Provide rich descriptive examples of these concepts as they manifest within the life stories of this unique population of young people (e.g., narrative; Huberman & Miles, 2002) to deepen interpretive, explanatory, and embedded understandings of relevant concepts in context.

Taken together, the integrative analytic approach aims to "describe the experiences" and concepts (e.g., phenomenology) of the Ready, Connected, and Supported framework and "report the stories" of young people as they pursue promising career pathways (e.g., narrative research; Creswell, 2009, p. 131).

The team engaged in a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding[K] to systematically analyze the interviews (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Inductive coding is a data-driven coding approach wherein the raw data and perspectives of participants, rather than a priori or theoretically imposed conceptual structures, drive the development of codes, concepts, and themes within the analysis. Accordingly, the research team engaged in an inductive process of open-coding using a constant comparison method to guide the generation and application of a set of distinct, data-driven codes. This inductive strategy was complemented by a deductive approach that enabled the organization of inductively generated codes to be guided by theories of human and career development and the core concepts of the YES Project and Ready, Connected, and Supported framework.

Several individual and group interview transcripts were used to build an initial coding scheme to ensure convergence across data sources, although the formal analysis was subsequently conducted using the group interview transcripts. The coding scheme, including definitions, illustrative excerpts of supporting data, and fully coded sample cases were presented to an external auditor to enhance validity.

Each transcript was independently coded by at least two members of the research team. For each transcript, discrepancies in the application of the coding scheme were resolved through a discursive consensus-building process, valuing multiple diverse viewpoints among analysts, while seeking to identify a common understanding of the best representation of the data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Consensual analytic processes are employed by qualitative researchers to enhance the validity, reliability, and decision quality within the analysis, by promoting iteration, consistency of shared understanding, "equal involvement, and shared power" among analysts (Hill et al., 1997, p. 523; Hill et al., 2005; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Reconciliation of discrepancies between consensus decisions and previously coded data were resolved by recoding all previously coded transcripts to ensure a consistent application of agreed upon changes across all transcripts. Analytic memos were detailed at all stages of the codebook construction and analytic process. Researchers recorded detailed field notes from site visits. Both of these processes help to triangulate the data and strengthen the reliability of the findings (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017).

J   The collected data is phenomenological but also narrative in nature, as interview protocols encourage the participants to share how key concepts, events, and relationships are imbued with subjective meaning that is organized as part of a cohesive story of their life and career.

K   A code is a word, short-phrase, or label that "assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to reduce or summarize larger blocks of text within the interview transcripts into meaningful units of analysis (Saldana, 2009, p. 3).

The final coding scheme *(See Appendix D)* was organized into seven categories of codes:

1. Role or Purpose of Work and Careers in Young People's Lives

2. Ready (e.g., Education, Training, and Applied Experience; Skills, Abilities, and Strengths)

3. Connected (e.g., Relationship Qualities, Function of Connectedness)

4. Supported (e.g., Instrumental Support, Emotional Support)

5. Sources and Pathways (e.g., Self, Family, School, Community)

6. Contextual Constraints (e.g., Adversity, Individual Factors, Family Factors)

7. Contextual Facilitators (e.g., Learning and Work Settings Characteristics; Societal or Community Conditions, etc.)

After examining the frequencies and co-occurrence of codes to identify patterns, the research team returned to the interviews to examine how these patterns manifest within the experiences and stories shared by each young person. By examining the interplay among codes within the narratives shared by the young people, the team identified three major thematic findings related to the research questions and presented within the report.

Site Profiles

Together, the five sites that participated in this qualitative research study offer a mix of program approaches, diverse community and program demographics with particular attention to underserved and underrepresented populations, and geographic spread across the United States. A more detailed description of site selection is included in Appendix A, Methodology.

Year Up, Baltimore, Maryland   yearup.org

Year Up's mission is to close the Opportunity Divide by ensuring that young adults gain the skills, experiences, and support that will empower them to reach their potential through careers and higher education. This one-year free program serves low- to moderate- income young people, aged 18-24. Year Up provides hands-on training, a six-month corporate internship, and support during and beyond the program year. Since opening its Baltimore site in 2010, Year Up has served more than 1,100 young adults in Baltimore and aims to serve more than 5,000 students nationally in 2020. Year Up has three different technical career tracks: Information Technology (IT), Sales and Customer Support, and Business Operations. Within 4 months of graduation, 85 percent of program participants are employed or enrolled in postsecondary education.

Urban Alliance, Chicago, Illinois   theurbanalliance.org

Urban Alliance's core program prepares under-resourced high school seniors for future economic self-sufficiency through an intensive, year-long experience that combines paid professional internships, job skills training, one-on-one mentoring, and ongoing post-program support. This program has provided 935 young people in Chicago with training and over 780 with both internships and training. 100 percent of Urban Alliance students graduate from high school and more than 90 percent are accepted to college. One year post-program, 80 percent of alumni remain connected to a college, career, or career-training pathway.

YouthBuild, Compton (Los Angeles Area), California   entrenousyouth.org/compton

Compton YouthBuild provides rigorous educational and vocational opportunities for young people ages 16+ who are invested in creating a sustainable future for themselves, their families and communities. YouthBuild focuses on serving low-income young adults and has 260 programs in the United States with over 148,000 students. This free program in Compton allows participants to choose between two occupational tracks: Building/Construction Trades and Culinary Arts/Hospitality. Among all enrollees, 54 percent went on to postsecondary education or jobs and 73 percent of those placed retained their placement for at least six months.

Iowa Jobs for America's Graduates (iJAG), Cedar Rapids, Iowa   ijag.org

The iJAG program works in partnership with secondary schools across Iowa to implement a model recognized for increasing graduation rates, reducing dropout rates, and providing one year of follow-up support after high school. iJAG students represent a diverse population who have experienced significant challenges in their lives. Sixty percent of iJAG students are individuals of color, 80 percent receive free/reduced lunches, and on average iJAG students experienced eight JAG "barriers". Over the course of 21 years, iJAG has supported 20,000 students. In 2019, students had a 97% graduation rate—stronger than Iowa's 91.6% statewide. Students master 37 core competencies which include career development, job attainment, job survival, basic skills, leadership and self-development, and life skills.

Per Scholas, Dallas, Texas   perscholas.org

Per Scholas is a 25-year-old national nonprofit whose mission is to drive positive and proven social change in communities across the country. Since 2015, Per Scholas Dallas has trained 925 individuals to launch dynamic careers in tech. Currently, Per Scholas offers tuition-free training in IT/Network Support, Software Engineering and Cyber Security. Per Scholas develops talent pipelines for employers that are considerably more diverse than the Dallas tech workforce today; 89% of learners are people of color, 30% are young adults and 40% are women. Per Scholas has a stellar track record, with 85% of students graduating, 80% landing jobs in tech and an average increase in post training wage of 300%. Per Scholas envisions a future where individuals from any community can access well-paying career positions, and where talent is recognized and recruited from many diverse sources.

APPENDIX C
Demographics

Group Interviews

A total of 65 young people *(See Table 1)* between the ages of 16 and 28 years (M = 20.60, SD = 3.26) took part in the group interviews. Of the total sample of group interview participants, 39 (60.0%) identified as female and 26 (40.0%) identified as male. Participants self-reported a diverse array of racial/ethnic backgrounds including African American/Black (n = 34, 52.3%), Hispanic/Latinx (n = 15, 23.1%), White (n = 6, 9.2%), Multiracial (n = 6, 9.2%%), Asian/Asian American (n = 3, 4.6%), and Other (n = 1, 1.5%). All programs from which young people were recruited explicitly and exclusively serve low-income young people and communities.

Highest level of education varied as follows: Less than high school diploma or HSE (n = 31, 47.7%), High school diploma or HSE (n = 6, 9.3%), Some college (n = 23, 35.4%), Associate's/Bachelor's (n = 5, 7.7%). Just over half (n = 37, 56.9%) reported current enrollment in a degree-granting education program (in or outside their career pathways program).

Approximately half of participants (n = 34, 52.3%) were employed, while just under half were not (n = 31, 47.7%). Among employed participants, 29 (85.2%) work part-time and 5 (14.7%) work full-time. Among those not employed (n = 31, 47.7%), most identified as looking for employment (n = 27, 87.1%), while a small proportion (n = 4, 12.9%) identified as not currently looking for employment.

Individual Interviews

Of the larger sample of group interview participants, 23 young people between the ages of 16 and 25 years (M=20.48, SD= 3.13) took part in individual interviews. Of the 23 individual interview participants, 14 (60.9%) identified as female and 9 (39.1%) identified as male. Participants reported a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds including African American/Black (n=13, 56.5%), Hispanic/Latinx (n=6, 26.1%), White (n=2, 8.7%), and Multiracial (n=2, 8.7%).

Highest level of education varied as follows: Less than high school diploma or HSE (n=12, 52.2%), High school diploma or HSE (n=2, 8.6%), Some college (n=7, 30.4%), Associate's/Bachelor's (n=2, 8.7%). Of the total sample, 13 (56.5%) reported current enrollment in a degree-granting education program (within or outside of their career pathways program).

The majority of respondents were employed (n=14, 60.9%), while just over one-third were not (n=9, 39.1%). Among employed participants, the majority were employed part-time (n=10, 71.4%), with several participants employed full-time (n=4, 28.6%). Among those not currently employed, the majority reported actively searching for employment (n=8, 88.9%), while one participant indicated that they were not currently searching (n=1, 11.1%).

TABLE 1: Participant Demographics

	GROUP INTERVIEW (N = 65)	INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW (N = 23)	BALTIMORE, MD (N=20)	CEDAR RAPIDS, IA (N=12)	CHICAGO, IL (N=10)	COMPTON, CA (N=13)	DALLAS, TX (N=10)
AGE							
Mean (SD)	20.60 (3.26)	20.48 (3.13)	21.25 (2.15)	17.08 (0.90)	18.7 (2.41)	21.31 (3.47)	24.5 (1.96)
GENDER (%)							
Male	26 (40.0)	9 (39.1)	5 (25.0)	5 (41.7)	4 (40.0)	6 (46.2)	6 (60.0)
Female	39 (60.0)	14 (60.9)	15 (75.0)	7 (58.3)	6 (60.0)	7 (53.8)	4 (40.0)
RACE/ETHNICITY (%)							
African American/ Black	34 (52.3)	13 (56.5)	17 (85.0)	5 (41.7)	5 (50.0)	3 (23.1)	4 (40.0)
Asian/ Asian American	3 (4.6)	—	—	—	—	—	3 (30.0)
Hispanic/ Latinx	15 (23.1)	6 (26.1)	—	—	5 (50.0)	9 (69.2)	1 (10.0)
Multiracial	6 (9.2)	2 (8.7)	2 (10.0)	3 (25.0)	—	—	1 (10.0)
White	6 (9.2)	2 (8.7)	1 (5.0)	4 (33.3)	—	—	1 (10.0)
Other	1 (1.5)	—	—	—	—	1 (7.7)	—
EDUCATION LEVEL (%)							
Less than High School	31 (47.7)	12 (52.2)	—	11 (91.7)	7 (70.0)	13 (100.0)	—
High School/ HSE	6 (9.3)	2 (8.6)	3 (15.0)	—	—	—	3 (30.0)
Some College	23 (35.4)	7 (30.4)	17 (85.0)	1 (8.3)	2 (20.0)	—	3 (30.0)
Associate/ Bachelor	5 (7.7)	2 (8.7)	—	—	1 (10.0)	—	4 (40.0)
ENROLLMENT STATUS (%)							
Enrolled	37 (56.9)	13 (56.5)	4 (20.0)	11 (91.7)	9 (90.0)	13 (100.0)	—
Not enrolled	28 (43.1)	10 (43.5)	16 (80.0)	1 (8.3)	1 (10.0)	—	10 (100.0)
EMPLOYMENT (%)							
Employed	34 (52.3)	14 (60.9)	5 (25.0)	10 (83.3)	10 (100.0)	6 (46.2)	3 (30.0)
Part Time	29 (85.2)	10 (71.4)	5 (100.0)	9 (90.0)	9 (90.0)	4 (66.7)	2 (66.7)
Full Time	5 (14.7)	4 (28.6)	—	1 (10.0)	1 (10.0)	2 (33.3)	1 (33.3)
Not employed	31 (47.7)	9 (39.1)	15 (75.0)	2 (16.7)	—	7 (53.8)	7 (70.0)
Searching	27 (87.1)	8 (88.9)	11 (73.3)	2 (100.0)	—	7 (100.0)	7 (100.0)
Not Searching	4 (12.9)	1 (11.1)	4 (26.7)	—	—	—-	—

Codes and Code Frequencies

TABLE 2: Codes and Code Frequencies

CODE NAME	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS CODE IS MENTIONED (N=10)	TOTAL NUMBER OF CODE MENTIONS ACROSS INTERVIEWS*
PURPOSE OF WORK	**10**	**231**
Safety, Stability, and Survival	10	91
Self-determination and Personal Satisfaction	10	87
Social Connections and Contributions	10	50
READY	**10**	**1,341**
Education, Training, and Applied Experience	10	212
Pursuit and Attainment of Degree or Certification	6	84
Work Experience (e.g., job, internship, etc.)	6	35
Skills, Abilities, and Strengths	10	326
Cognitive, Academic, and Technical Skills	10	154
Social Emotional Skills	9	106
Career Management Skills	9	61
Career Identity	10	295
Career Interests and Values	8	24
Career Choice, Decision Making, and Reasoning	7	43
Career Exploration	6	16
Awareness of Strengths (e.g., Self- Efficacy, Confidence)	6	23
Personal or Social Identity Development	8	28
Adaptability, Coping and Problem Solving Strategies	10	461
Cognitive Strategies and Mindset Shifts	10	142
Goal Adjustment and Prioritization	10	118
Identifying and Seizing Opportunities	10	47
Perseverance	10	31
Changing Your Environment	9	32
Advocating for Self	8	13
Seeking and Accepting Support	7	35
Independent Problem Solving	7	33
Adopt Healthier Behaviors, Reduce Risk Behavior	2	5
CONNECTED	**10**	**867**
Level of Connectedness	10	183
Interpersonal Connectedness	10	126

Organizational or Institutional Connectedness	9	49
Connectedness to Work or Career	3	8
Relationship Qualities	9	320
Mutuality, Bidirectionality, Reciprocity	9	31
Shared Perspectives and Experiences (e.g., interests, values)	8	40
Temporal Characteristics (e.g., duration, consistency, frequency)	8	31
Closeness and Intimacy	7	34
Trust, Credibility, Reliability	7	24
Safety and Acceptance	7	24
Cares About Me (e.g., invested in my growth)	7	22
Communication	7	21
Interconnection (e.g., interactions/coordination between multiple relationships)	7	20
Function of Connectedness	9	182
Social Capital	9	102
Participating in Relationships (Need for relatedness)	8	38
SUPPORTED	**10**	**272**
Instrumental Support	10	36
Emotional Support	10	35
Informational Support	10	50
Appraisal Support	9	35
Modelling by Others	10	88
SOURCES OR PATHWAYS	**10**	**637**
Self	4	21
Family	9	153
Mom	8	44
Dad	6	23
Siblings	8	18
Child	1	1
Grandparents	4	13
Aunt/Uncle	6	10
Cousin	4	8
Peers and Romantic Relationships	10	77
Peers	10	64
Romantic Relationships	5	7
School	8	94
Teacher	8	25

Extracurricular Activities & People (e.g., coaches)	4	18
Counselor	3	5
College	6	33
Community, Neighborhood, Society, Other	8	51
Media Sources	4	7
Formal Supports (e.g., therapist, tutor)	3	11
Religious Community	3	10
Family Friends	3	4
Community Programs and Camps	3	3
Career Pathways Program	10	155
Program Staff	7	14
Work-Related Settings	8	53
Coworkers	6	7
Boss	5	7
Companies and Organizations	3	3
CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS	10	760
Adversity	10	179
Poverty and Financial Hardship or Instability	10	43
Housing Insecurity, Relocation, Moving Frequently	9	43
Death of a Family Member	8	15
Parents Divorce, Separation, Unhealthy Relationship	6	14
Community Violence	4	22
Domestic Violence and Abuse	3	14
Parent Family Physical or Mental Illness	3	9
Parent Drug and Alcohol Abuse	2	6
Parent Incarcerated	2	6
Individual Factors	10	222
Readiness Concerns (e.g., lack of skills, experience)	8	97
Beliefs and Attitudes	10	81
Mental and Physical Health Concerns	7	30
Risk Behaviors	3	13
Family Factors	9	71
Caretaking Responsibilities & Working to Provide	8	27
Parent Balancing Multiple Responsibilities	5	9
Cultural Concerns (e.g., language barrier)	4	11
Single Parent	3	7

Relationship Problem with Parent (non-abusive)	4	6
Sibling Concerns	3	5
Disorganized Living Situation	3	4
Peer and Romantic Relationships	5	22
Difficulty Forming and Managing Relationships	4	12
Negative Peer or Romantic Relationships	4	10
Learning and Work Settings Factors	10	182
Culture, Safety, and Wellness Barriers	10	49
Barriers to Access	8	35
Structure, Relevance, Quality of Training	7	62
Schedule, Hours, Work-Life Balance Problems	6	16
Inadequate Pay	5	8
Lack of Institutional Resources	5	5
Transportation	2	7
Societal or Community Factors	6	30
Community Resource Disparities and Inequality	6	22
Historical and Generational Differences	2	6
Discrimination and Bias	2	2
Lack of Caring Adults (e.g., Relationship Poverty)	10	55
Lack of Support and Mentorship	9	39
Lack of Network and Social Capital	4	6
CONTEXTUAL FACILITATORS	10	184
Personal and Family Circumstances	8	20
Stable Living Environment	3	6
Financial Stability	2	2
Learning and Work Setting Characteristics	10	151
Volition, Autonomy, and Agency	8	35
Grow My Readiness and Human Capital	8	24
Decent Work Conditions	7	17
Financially Viable & Right Amount of Structure	7	13
Increased Relevance	6	20
Openness to Whole person	6	14
Clear and Efficient Pathways	5	7
High Quality Training and Formal Coursework	5	7
Societal or Community Conditions (e.g., Resources, Policies, and Attitudes)	5	13

*Category counts do not sum from subcode counts

About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads campaigns and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

About the YES Project

The YES Project (Young, Employed, Successful), a national initiative launched by America's Promise Alliance, was created to support and grow our youth workforce so that every young person seeking a job can find a job. To tackle this ambitious goal, the YES Project teamed up with nonprofits, researchers, and employers to articulate three conditions for success: Ready, Connected, and Supported. The Ready, Connected, and Supported framework is the backbone of the YES Project and serves as a consensus point for everyone—from public officials, to community leaders, to young people themselves–to drive action toward increasing youth employment.

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THE YES PROJECT
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AmericasPromise.org/Yes