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# Career and College Readiness for Underserved Youth: Educator and Youth Perspectives

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**Abstract**

This study solicited perspectives of underserved youth and educators who serve them regarding college and career readiness. We defined underserved youth as adolescents who experience inequitable access to educational resources. Purposeful sampling was used to select 84 focus group participants including educators and students (9–12th grade). Utilizing grounded theory analysis, focus group data revealed findings in three key categories. First, student and educator participants defined readiness as specific career knowledge and skills to develop concrete postschool plans. Second, both educators and students perceived limited availability of career preparation experiences as a barrier, while educators also provided examples of challenging life circumstances which deter youth from fully realizing their college and career potential. Third, educators and students reported that providing a broad array of career related learning activities, coupled with

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the presence of trusted adults who serve as mentors and guides, can create capacity for young people to expand career options.

**Keywords**
education, emerging adulthood/adult transition, focus groups, poverty/disadvantage, role models/mentors

## Introduction

The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; Public Law 114-95) provided states, districts and schools with an opportunity to create new standards and systems to address college and career readiness for all young people. Under ESSA, high school success has been redefined as not only ensuring that students complete academic requirements to graduate, but also preparing them with knowledge and skills to succesfully navigate complex career and college environments. A 2017 policy report concluded,

> . . .perhaps the most important opportunity under ESSA for states, districts, and schools is the chance to rise to the challenge set before them—to recognize and advance the dignity, promise, and potential in all students as they strive to graduate high school and college, to excel in their school experiences, and to be fully prepared to succeed and shape the life ahead of them." (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 22).

Despite these broad national policy efforts, career and college readiness approaches have often excluded historically marginalized or underserved youth (Majors, 2019). Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) describe underserved youth as students who have not received equitable resources in the educational pipeline including; youth from low socioeconomic status families, youth of color, those with disabilities, immigrants, and English learners. These youth have not benefitted equally from career and college readiness efforts, and their individual and collective strengths have gone largely unrecognized (Kanno, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to solicit new perspectives on college and career readiness, seeking to understand context and conditions that may influence educational trajectories and post-school opportunities for underserved youth. Rather than focusing on deficiencies of students who are often viewed as "unprepared" for rigorous academic coursework or technical careers, we sought instead to solicit perspectives and recommendations directly from the youth themselves, along with teachers and other school personnel responsible for college and career readiness. These voices are critical to shaping college and career readiness policies and practices, and support

previous calls to explore student and teacher perspectives to illuminate our understanding of career and college readiness for underserved youth (e.g., Duncheon, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

## *Definitions of College and Career Readiness*

Most formal definitions of college and career readiness focus on a core set of knowledge and skills for postsecondary or career training programs. For example, the Educational Policy Research Center notes: "a student who is ready for college and career can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (Conley, 2012, p. 1).

Researchers at the College and Career Readiness and Success Center (CCRSC) reviewed and analyzed state definitions of college and career readiness which are often used to inform strategic planning at local, regional, and state levels and increase college readiness. The majority of definitions of college and career readiness include a set of concrete knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students must demonstrate to be prepared for postsecondary success. More than half of the 21 state plans analyzed by CCRSC include at least four of the following six categories: (a) academic knowledge; (b) critical thinking and/or problem solving; (c) social and emotional learning, collaboration, and/or communication; (d) grit/resilience/perseverance; (e) citizenship and/or community involvement; and (f) additional activities (e.g., lifelong learning, technology, interfacing with diverse cultures, and worldviews) (Mishkind, 2014).

## *College and Career Readiness for Underserved Youth*

Although these state policy definitions provide a framework for college and career readiness, they often represent a "one size fits all" approach which may not fully represent the needs, strengths or priorities of underserved youth and their families (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010). For youth who have historically been marginalized within school systems, developing ideas and plans about the world of postsecondary education and work may be restricted by low expectations from teachers and limited opportunities to engage in rigorous academic coursework or career technical education (Doll et al., 2013; Kanno, 2018). Without appropriate instruction and career planning that builds upon individual, family, and community strengths, underserved students may experience a gap between career *aspirations and attainment* (Savickas et al., 2009). Due to systemic barriers, these youth are also at risk of having limited vision for the future and may need to expand or transform their sense of possible post school opportunities or "future selves" (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

In addition to restricted visions for the future, college knowledge (i.e., knowing which courses to take in high school, understanding financial aid options) may not be equally accessible to underserved students from families and communities who are historically underrepresented or marginalized (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Majors, 2019). For example, in her qualitative study of English language learners enrolled in a well-resourced high school, Kanno (2018) found that opportunities for college preparation were not equally available to all youth and that substantial structural inequities led to the under-education of these youth. Many educators in this study were largely unaware of these barriers and instead attributed underachievement to the student's deficits (Kanno, 2018).

### *Purpose of this Study*

Previous research has documented challenges and barriers to college readiness, access, and retention for underserved youth (Hammond et al., 2007; Hooker & Brand, 2010). However, there is a limited body of research documenting the daily realities and critical perspectives of high school teachers, administrators, and students regarding career and college preparation services and supports available within their school systems and communities (Duncheon, 2018). Ideas about college and careers are formed within the context of school, family, and community experiences, and soliciting these perspectives will enable us to more fully describe the unique career and college readiness needs of underserved youth and gain critical knowledge to improve current systems and approaches.

## Methods

This study utilized a qualitative grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that provides systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data to inform the development of theory (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology is well suited to achieve the purpose of our study, allowing us to build our findings from the "ground up," based on the detailed descriptive data provided by youth and educators, regarding their lived experiences.

### *Participants*

We utilized purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify participants for the study. Purposeful sampling is a widely used strategy in qualitative research for identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals

that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Schools and participants were purposefully selected to represent two key stakeholder groups who offered important and unique perspectives on career and college readiness for underserved youth. For purposes of this study, we specifically recruited youth who experienced one or more of the following barriers that can limit educational attainment and restrict post school opportunities: (a) low school achievement, (b) retention/over age for grade, (c) sporadic school attendance, (d) pattern of behavior referrals/suspensions, (e) low family socioeconomic status, or (f) identified with a learning or emotional disability (Hammond et al., 2007).

*Schools.* Six high schools from two Western states were selected for their representation of common educational environments for underserved high school youth. The school populations ranged from 84 to 1,226 students. Between 47% and 81% of students in these schools were eligible for free and reduced lunch and 11% to 22% were identified for special education services. After agreeing to participate in this study, school staff were asked to identify and invite: (a) underserved high school students, and (b) education personnel who had direct contact with the participating students.

*Students.* Students in this study ($n=37$) were selected based on the criteria for underserved youth described above. The gender make-up of the student sample was 59% male and 41% female. In regard to ethnicity, 46% of the students self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. In regard to race, students self-identified as White (41%), African American (14%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (11%), unspecified other (25%), and two declined to respond (5%). The students were enrolled in grades 9 (19%), 10 (16%), 11 (32%), and 12 (32%).

*Education personnel.* The educators who participated in this study ($n=47$) were 36% male and 64% female. In regard to ethnicity, 6% self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. In regard to race, they self-identified as White (87%), other not specified (6%), African American (2%), Asian (2%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2%). This group was comprised of teachers (40%), administrators (15%), counselors (15%), instructional assistants (13%), transition specialists (11%), administration support (4%), and a curriculum advisor (1%). In regard to education level, the school personnel had graduate degrees (55%), bachelor's degrees (34%), associate degrees, (6%), and high school diplomas (4%). Their professional experience ranged from $<$1-year to 36-years with an average of 15-years.

## Procedures

After receiving human subjects approval from the University's Institutional Review Board, we conducted two focus groups at each participating high school for a total of 12 groups (six student and six educator groups). All focus groups were facilitated by a research team member, who also provided an overview of the study and reviewed the informed consent procedures prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews. Focus groups were conducted after school or in the evenings at the schools, and each focus group consisted of two to nine members. The focus groups, typically 60-minutes in length, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Prior to the focus groups, the researchers conducted a literature review that informed the development of focus group protocols: student (six questions) and educators (six questions). The focus group protocols followed Krueger and Casey's (2015) suggestions regarding format and content with the questions targeting participant perceptions regarding: (a) definitions of college and career readiness, (b) barriers and facilitators that impact academic achievement and school engagement for underserved youth, and (c) potential strategies and content needed to improve college and career readiness.

## Data Analysis

Focus group data were coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2001). First, research team members individually reviewed the interview transcripts, seeking to document patterns and relationships across data sources. The team then met to review and confirm a set of detailed descriptive codes such as "relationships with teachers" and "barriers to educational outcomes." Codes were used to assign concrete labels to individual passages of text utilizing a web based qualitative software program (www.dedoose.com). To ensure that analysis and interpretations were not idiosyncratic or biased, all interview transcripts were coded by two members of the research team following a common coding scheme. We did not attempt to resolve coding differences. Instead, coders reached initial agreement on the definition of each code and multiple codes were assigned to each text passage to allow for flexible yet consistent data interpretation (Anfara et al., 2002).

In the second phase of analysis, we further analyzed and synthesized the data across sources and topics. During this phase, we conducted a second level of coding and analysis to identify specific responses for each stakeholder group, ultimately reducing the coded data into three broader categories. After completing this second level of detailed analysis, we created data

tables to document key themes and sub-themes identified by respondent group, including supporting quotes from the coded transcripts. Data tables were accompanied by brief explanatory memos, allowing us to outline concepts and patterns that formed the backbone of our findings. Finally, we compared and contrasted findings both within and across participant groups and developed visual models to integrate and display the major findings.

## Findings

We present our findings in three sections, aligned with the three major categories of data analysis. First, we describe how students and educators defined key components of college and career readiness. Next, we outline the major barriers identified that may constrain college and career preparation and present participant identified strategies to facilitate school engagement and preparation for postsecondary success. Within each category, we describe and elucidate the primary themes that emerged through the grounded theory analysis, and delve into important areas of convergance and divergence between student and educator perspectives.

### *Defining College and Career Readiness*

We asked students and educators to define what it means to be "ready" for college and careers from their unique perspectives. Although participants differed somewhat in the specific knowledge, skills, and experiences they considered to be vital, three major themes emerged: (a) developing awareness of career options, (b) demonstrating career competencies and skills, and (c) having a clear plan for next steps after high school.

*Developing awareness of career options.* Educators interviewed noted that students need to have knowledge of career options including opportunities to enter the workforce or postsecondary education. Educator focus group participants stressed the need for students to be aware of a wide range of career opportunities, as many of these youth had limited exposure to the variety of possible postsecondary occupations or training programs available. Students reinforced this general theme, but spoke primarily about specific actions that might be taken to broaden understanding and awareness, such as participating in campus tours to get exposure to college life.

Many educators also reinforced the concept that higher education may not be the only road to a successful career, noting the opportunity to learn a trade or enroll in other short-term occupational training or certificate programs could provide a pathway to higher wage occupations. One teacher expressed

the importance of expanding the range of post-school options, commenting that "*It seems to have been shifting a little bit, which I'm glad to see that college isn't the only way out of the gate. (. . .). A lot of our kids are thinking in terms of trades."*

*Demonstrating career competencies and skills.* Focus group participants felt that college and career readiness also involved being able to demonstrate a number of career related competencies and skills including both academic and employability skills. Educators and students both emphasized the importance of academic skills such as reading, writing, and study skills and the ability to apply those skills to complete required coursework and credits needed for high school graduation. A teacher reflected, "*I think to start with we look for students who are well rounded and complete a variety of tasks and courses at school."* Study and organizational skills were also important to students. One noted that to be successful in college and careers, you need "*to be able to plan when you're gonna do your homework, when to study and what time you have to go to school, or work."*

Many educators interviewed thought that academic skills in isolation were not sufficient for career and college readiness. Instead young people preparing for the future also need to demonstrate basic employability or "soft skills"—often defined as a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, and attitudes that enable people to navigate their environment and interact effectively with other people. One teacher remarked, "*my thought is that not only do they have the academic skills but they also have the soft skills and that they're able to get along with others and have skills to problem solve,"* while another noted, *"one of the most important things for our youth is all the soft skills—how to communicate, how to have relationships, positive relationships with people, how to ask for help when needed."* Other important soft skills and traits identified included: advocacy, communication, coping, time management, adaptability, grit, persistence, and hope.

Student focus group participants did not discuss the concept of "soft skills" but instead stressed the need to learn practical skills to apply for both employment and college opportunities. Many students believed that, to be ready for post-school opportunities, they needed specific instruction in skills such as writing a resume, applying and interviewing for jobs, and applying for financial aid or scholarships to attend college. Considering the prospect of finding employment, one student said, *"I think that creating your own resume from stuff you have actually done would be helpful, (. . .) and then in addition just tips on what to do, like how to get an interview."*

*Creating a post-school career plan.* Third, both educator and student participants believed that having a clear plan for transitioning into college and/or careers directly after high school was critical. As one teacher indicated, "*being prepared for college and careers means they have a plan. I think they need to leave with some kind of plan where they're going, (. . .) whether that's trade school or just going into the workforce."* This plan needs to be individualized and be based on the student's abilities, assets, and interests. A student echoed this theme, reflecting,

> *I feel like you have to have a plan. A plan for you to like, organize. To know if you have a job, to know your hours. To be able to plan when you're gonna do your homework, when to study and what time you have to go to school, or work. I feel like you should be able to plan out whatever you have, for the future.*

## *Understanding Perceived Barriers and Challenges*

When asked to discuss the challenges involved in preparing youth for career and college opportunities, participants consistently described limited career preparation experiences available in their schools and communities. The eductors interviewed also described instability or challenging life circumstances that may impact opportunities for learning and career preparation.

*Limited career preparation experiences.* Both students and educators described the lack of career related learning opportunities available in their school districts and communities. In many cases, reductions in funding for public schools significantly reduced the number and types of vocational or career technical education courses available. One student noted, "*We need (. . .) something other than wood shop.*" Overall, participants felt that young people were negatively impacted by limited or non-existent opportunities for hands-on learning to prepare for employment, and wanted schools to provide a range of career-technical education, work experience, or internship programs.

In addition to limited career-technical coursework or work-based learning experiences, participants noted that school staff or programs did not provide comprehensive information about college and career options. Again, the lack of resources in schools and communities reduced the availability of potentially engaging career exploration experiences such as field trips, college visits, or community service projects. This gap in services was especially prevalent in the three rural schools included in this study. Many students expressed concern about the lack of career and college information. In describing career preparation activities available at a more well-resourced suburban

high school, one student said, "*because I know they do that at* [Name of School]. *They have a college fair. There's nothing like that around here."*

*Instability and life circumstances.* Another pervasive challenge identified by the educators interviewed, was the difficult home environments and uncertain family situations experienced by many underserved students. One teacher described the family status of many youth enrolled in their alternative school,

> *The other thing that was a real eye-opener for me is there's a huge percentage of our population that has lost a significant caregiver. Either they are dead or they've been incarcerated for a long period of time. Or abandoned them.*

Educators reported that day-to-day stresses of living in poverty or unpredictable family situations impacted the ability for underserved youth to learn or benefit from college readiness programs. An educator described how many of these students have to cope with the ongoing demands of unstable family situations:

> *I also think it's important, especially with foster youth and some of the other kids that may come from broken homes or issues like that, that you're a little more understanding that sometimes they can't do a lot of their stuff at home because there's so many more things going on in their life. And sometimes they might come to school tired because they couldn't sleep all night cause something happened. Or maybe they didn't eat . . . I know I had this student this morning that didn't have any food and they got here late because they had to babysit their stepbrothers and sisters.*

Students experiencing family poverty and hardship also may have limited access to adult role models or mentors who can provide support for the process of transition to careers and college. Although some students benefit from extended and supportive family networks or community mentors, one educator remarked on the lack of guidance for some youth who may have fewer supports and navigational capital to apply for and transition into college, "*A lot of our students are the first generation to go to school*."

Overall, we found that limited career preparation opportunities often resulted in students who did not have equitable access to information and resources and thus were not fully prepared with knowledge and awareness of career or college options. Educators also noted that uncertain home environments created challenges to engagement in college and career preparation. One educator concluded that "*They aren't basically ready for what they are going to need to do when they get to college."*

## *Providing Strategies and Support*

Focus group participants also discussed strategies for career and college readiness for underserved youth and described several keys to success. The two major themes that emerged from the data in this category were: (a) positive relationships with trusted adults, and (b) career related learning experiences, which together offered a solid foundation for postschool opportunities.

*Relationships with trusted adults.* One of the most important strategies identified by students and eductors participating in this study was the presence of positive relationships with adults who could inspire, guide, and mentor them. Educators across multiple schools articulated the potentially powerful influence of building a connection with a trusted adult:

> *What it really comes down to for me is that in order to do all this stuff there has to be the opportunity for the kid to build a relationship with people at the school*

> *Because I think that if you talk to underserved youth who (. . .) you know, were sort of going down the path we don't want to see them go down, but somehow turn it around. And you ask them, 'Well, what was it that turned you to this different path?' And many times, it's a trusted adult. They have a trusted adult on campus or someplace that helps guides them, that mentors them.*

Students also confirmed the importance of having adults at school who are willing to listen and provide unconditional support for their dreams. When asked about things that schools could do to help prepare them for college and careers, one student commented, "*the teacher, I'd have to say, is probably one of the most important things. (. . .) They are the teachers that make you want to confide in them because of the way they act with you."* As much as the instruction provided, teachers being available for encouragement and emotional support was a key for student success, despite any personal challenges. One student reflected on the power of these relationships,

> *A teacher that will understand if you're going through some stuff, you're not going to be able to show up—but you still want to be a part of it. Give people chances. Somebody that actually cares. Because there's a lot of schools that you go to and you're like, 'I don't want to do this stuff anymore, it's not helping me.' You want a teacher that's going to sit there and talk to you and tell you, 'Hey, come on. You need this. This is for you.'*

*Career related learning activities.* A second important strategy identified by educators and students was insuring opportunities for career related learning experiences, including career technical education classes. Several students described the value of hands on, skill building classes such as culinary, welding, and small engine repair. These courses provided practical skills and also potentially opened up future career options. Other career related opportunities suggested by educators included: field trips to local businesses, college tours, career inventories, career-related clubs, and guest speakers representing various careers. All of these career related learning activities expose youth to a range of career pathways and potentially inspire them to expand their aspirations. A teacher remembered that:

> *I think it's important that we have guest speakers who (. . .) traveled down the same road that they've traveled and become successful. There's been a couple times when we had college students who have been in juvenile hall or even been in prison and have come back and spoken with our students and they've said, 'Wow, if they can do it, I can do it.'*

Overall, focus group participants identified career related learning along with guidance and support from trusted adults as key elements that can build confidence and ultimately shape and influence career and college readiness for underserved youth. As one educator remarked, "*Anytime you offer them something that has a road out of high school that's realistic and something they can understand, and get their teeth sunk into, so to speak, they're very interested in that."*

## Discussion

Our focus group interviews with students and educators provided new insights into college and career readiness for underserved youth enrolled in primarily rural or low-income schools in two Western states. These findings offer additional depth and nuance to the standard definitions of career and college readiness used in state and national policy discussions and help provide a more fully developed picture of the barriers faced and supports needed by underserved youth who may appear to be unengaged in school or have limited aspirations for the future.

Across focus groups, participants offered definitions of college and career readiness and talked about what it means to be "ready" to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. Youth from low income families and underserved communities may not always have access to information about postsecondary education and training options (Duncheon, 2018; Welton

& Martinez, 2014), and focus group data confirmed the importance of exposure to a broad range of options during high school. Students interviewed were especially interested in engaging in immediate action oriented steps to increase knowledge and awareness, such as making college visits. College and career readiness also meant that youth needed to demonstrate both academic and employability skills, and educators reinforced the importance of what other researchers have conceptualized as "noncognitive" or soft skills (Farrington et al., 2012) such as communication, adaptability, problem solving, and persistence. Finally, both students and educators described the importance of crystallizing career information into a concrete plan that can be implemented after high school completion. It was clear that these participants were not looking for abstract, conceptual definitions of college and career readiness but rather actionable steps leading directly to entry into a four-year university, community college, trade school, or employment.

Focus group interviews also revealed the complex and multifaceted barriers that may restrict college and career preparation for underserved youth. Mirroring Deil-Amen and DeLuca's (2010) findings regarding restricted college pathways for lower SES, underrepresented minority, immigrant, English language learners and first-generation college students, we found that many low income or rural schools did not have the resources to offer an array of career technical education courses or structured work experience programs, and that student participants were especially concerned about the inadequate hands-on learning available in their high schools. Students and educators also believed that schools should consistently offer active career exploration experiences such as field trips, college visits, or community internships. Although the negative impacts of poverty on educational outcomes have been well documented (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2007), our findings extend the literature by illuminating the ways that challenging life circumstances influence young people's college and career trajectories. Educators interviewed noted that youth in their schools and communities, faced with hunger, unstable housing, or family losses, were simply unable to engage with career or college learning experiences and may not have consistent access to trusted adult mentors who could offer guidance regarding college preparation and planning. While students interviewed did not explicitly identify the challenging life circumstances recognized by educators as barriers, the combination of inadequate career learning experiences, acknowledged by students and educators alike, and these challenging home situations contributed to the "college readiness debt" experienced by many underserved youth (Kanno, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

In addition to identifying barriers, educators and students also described strategies that may serve to bolster career readiness and boost career

self-efficacy. Just as the lack of career-related learning experiences served as a barrier, the availability of a broad range of career experiences was described as an important strategy to bolster successful transitions. Consistent with previous studies, focus group participants believed that adolescents needed to participate in a variety of activities such as completing career inventories, participating in career related clubs, and engaging with young adults who have successfully walked the path from underserved communities to college and career success (Balfanz et al., 2007; Martinez et al., 2017). Beyond these experiences, focus group participants highlighted the key role of relationships with trusted adults who can mentor and guide youth during their high school years. Teachers, counselors, community members, and other mentors can serve as sounding boards and advocates, and our focus group findings reinforced previous studies that have described the important role of consistent supportive relationships in building confidence and career self-efficacy (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Individual connections with caring adults in concert with active engaged learning experiences can provide these youth with "*a road out of high school*" and a clearer pathway to career and college readiness.

### *Limitations*

This study has several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. We conducted face to face interviews with youth and educators; however our purposeful sampling procedures may have also limited the study. Participants were selected using pre-defined criteria and included only students and educators from rural, suburban, and alternative school settings in two Western states. Further research from other regions of the country or with other marginalized or underserved groups is needed to confirm these themes and further elaborate on critical college and career readiness barriers and strategies. In addition, although the student participants represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, educators who participated were predominantly white (87%), reflecting the well documented national challenge of lack of diversity in the teacher workforce (Boser, 2014).

### *Implications for Future Research and Practice*

Despite these limitations, our focus group findings contribute to the sparse literature reflecting student and educator perspectives on career and college readiness for underserved youth. In terms of future research, further studies are needed to better understand the specific courses, activities, and other engaged learning experiences that may influence career development and promote

career self-efficacy for this population. Longitudinal studies following young adults beyond high school into the early career years could also contribute to our understanding of specific pathways to postschool education and employment and the factors that influence these outcomes over time. Focus group findings also highlighted the potential impact of challenging home environments on career and college readiness, and support the need for future studies exploring malleable factors that may serve as a buffer to family instability.

This study also documents the importance of career-related learning experiences and supports the need for teachers, school counselors, and other educators to collaborate with students and their families in order to create opportunities for underserved youth to explore a wide variety of career and college options and develop concrete action plans for the transition out of high school. Savickas et al. (2009) suggest youth may benefit from engaging in activities and meaning-making experiences that help them build a new view of themselves. These experiences should emphasize: "identity" (vs. personality); "adaptability" (vs. maturity); "intentionality" (vs. decidedness); and "stories" (vs. scores; Savickas, 2012, p. 14). Likewise, Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) advise that underserved youth will benefit from programs designed to support positive pathways to college and career that include opportunities for students to explore possible selves and imagine future adult outcomes. We concur with previous researchers and recommend that schools offer future focused career interventions that build on student strengths since these approaches can be particularly impactful during late adolescence up through the period of emerging adulthood when adult career trajectories begin to form (Oyserman et al., 2002).

Given that our study participants highlighted the importance of concrete skills and dispositions (e.g., interpersonal skills) when defining college and career readiness, we recommend one practical approach for incorporating these skills into college and career readiness programming. One strategy is to use a sequential approach when structuring college and career readiness programs so that behavioral skills serve as a bridge linking students' future aspirations to the procedural knowledge needed for college and career. For instance, one model of a college and career readiness program for underserved youth, known as *Paths to the Future for All (P2F4A)*, first helps students establish their future aspirations through a set of activities where students identify their strengths and map out their future trajectories (Gee, et al., in press). Students then build critical skills to achieve those futures, including coping, proactive communication, and goal setting. Finally, students weave together their future aspirations and skills, linking both to the procedural knowledge they need for college and career planning.

In addition to the *P2F4A* curriculum model, there are several other examples of college and career readiness programs that practitioners can draw upon as possible best practices. While these programs were designed to support the needs of underrepresented students (e.g., youth from low-income backgrounds), these models have strong potential to be replicated thereby reaching students on a broader scale. For example, the Making My Future Work (MMFW; Perry et al., 2018) curriculum, consisting of four modules, incorporates lessons on self-awarenes and behavioral skills. These are the types of "soft-skills" that educators in our focus groups felt that students needed as part of a more well-rounded approach to enhancing students' career competencies and skills. Another career-focused intervention, known as School-to-Jobs (STJ; Oyserman et al., 2002), offers a series of nine sessions through which students develop future plans and strategies they can leverage to attain a possible vision of who they want to become as adults (Oyserman et al., 2002). The strategies highlighted in these two examples—helping students build behavioral skills as well as helping them envision and plan for who they aspire to become—can be explicitly incorporated into wide range of career and college readiness programs.

Based on the perspectives students and educators, we found that career and college readiness for underserved youth includes demonstrating career knowledge and skills and having the ability to develop a concrete actionable post-school plan. Barriers such as limited career preparation experiences and unstable home situations may restrict career development and prevent youth from accessing key skills to successfully transition into college or careers. However, providing a broad array of career related learning and exploration activities, coupled with the presence of trusted adults who can serve as mentors and guides can not only empower young people to expand their horizons, but help them build both confidence and positive pathways toward their futures.

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**Kevin A. Gee**, Ed.D., is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. His research expertise focuses on how school policies and programs promote the well-being and educational outcomes of vulnerable youth who face a broad array of adverse conditions and experiences including school bullying, food insecurity, and abuse and neglect. He asks policy-relevant questions critical to understanding how their experiences of adversity influence their schooling-related outcomes; and how school policies and programs can enhance their well-being and educational outcomes.

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