



# Success, Redefined

**How Nondegree Pathways Empower Youth to Chart Their Own Course to Confidence, Employability, and Financial Freedom**

# Introduction:

## A Shift in Public Opinion and Need

Our paper *Degrees of Risk* examines the prevailing awareness and understanding among Gen Z youth and employers of diverse, nontraditional, education-to-career pathways that do not include degrees—like apprenticeships, boot camps, certifications, and others. In the paper, we present evidence of changing norms: young people increasingly want and need to pursue such pathways to help them obtain skills that lead to quality jobs. And we present evidence of a growing appetite among employers to widen the talent pool by hiring from nondegree pathways.

The survey respondents in *Degrees of Risk*, like many in the workforce and education ecosystem, largely said success has for too long been defined by a degree. Admission into college (or not) influences how young people see themselves, on which pursuits they focus their energies, and how they envision their future selves. The underlying polarity, unfortunately, has long been, you get a degree and succeed or you don't and you fail.

Among employers, the college degree has served as a gatekeeping mechanism that has privileged a too-small pool of candidates, and that has inadvertently functioned to screen out greater numbers of people with strong potential. How can this still be the case when swathes

of jobs sit unfilled? The norms that have long governed conventional hiring for “good” jobs are deeply entrenched.

The research presented in [Degrees of Risk](#) shows that employers are hungry to find new ways to hire, and new sources of talent. A growing demographic of young people – energized by a desire for something different – are saying no to the route that's long been promoted as the ideal. Some are looking for new ways to define success, on their terms and in ways that work for their lives and needs. Nonetheless, even among those hoping for change, perceptions of risk and fear of straying from the status quo have hampered their ability to pursue, or to hire from, pathways.






In this paper, we strengthen and build upon the research that formed the basis of *Degrees of Risk*. We do so by examining the mindset of young people who have chosen to forgo traditional higher education, including those who are pursuing nondegree pathways. This paper is intended to improve public awareness of such pathways by exploring how they benefit real people, how they are poised to benefit the workforce, and what barriers still stand in the way of their acceptance into the mainstream. First, here is an overview of the terminology used in the paper:

## What are pathways?

In the context of this paper, pathways are characterized as diverse, nontraditional education-to-career options. Because our research this year focused exclusively on young people who have not pursued, and are not planning to pursue, traditional college degrees, we examine pathways that do not inherently culminate in degrees. From here on out, we will simply use the term pathways, except in instances where the nondegree caveat is contextually important.

However, it's important to note that a pathway student is not precluded from pursuing a degree at a later point in time and may even have a degree already. Some pathways, in fact, can lead to or count toward a degree. Pathways can stand alone as career-defining experiences or form independent building blocks in a greater education-to-career journey.

While not an exhaustive list, the following programs and experiences may be included in a pathway:

	<b>Apprenticeship</b>	A formal program of study that blends work experience (typically paid) with a structured program of coursework
	<b>Boot camp</b>	A short-term, specialized, intensive training focused on technical skills for a career (e.g., a coding boot camp)
	<b>Certificate</b>	A credential issued as part of postsecondary study for credit or noncredit learning (e.g., a certificate in business from a college)
	<b>Certification</b>	A voluntary industry/trade credential requiring some form of competency-based assessment (e.g., certified welder)
	<b>License</b>	A competency-based credential required by the state to meet occupation requirements (e.g., registered nurse)



Learn more about the landscape of pathways in JFF's report [Universe of Possibilities](#)

And now, we take a closer look at the current landscape.

## Fewer and fewer young people are choosing college

Second to cost, a lack of clarity on what to do after high school remains the biggest factor in this decision, or nondecision, as it were. Many young people who normally might have pursued college seem to be opting out. Declining college enrollments paint a picture of many young people saying no to the traditional postsecondary pathway, and with overall enrollment failing to return to pre-pandemic levels (-9% with 2023, compared to 2019), this appears to be bigger than simply a pandemic-related anomaly.<sup>1</sup>

What accounts for the decline? Decisions about one's future—societal, financial, and familial pressures notwithstanding—are highly personal. Every young person will have their own unique reasons for saying, “Yes, I’m going to college,” or, “No, it’s not for me.”

Young people’s decision-making process today is also set against a backdrop of numerous, historically weighty events impacting higher education, including a Supreme Court decision to overturn pandemic-era financial aid forgiveness,<sup>2</sup> new rules and formulas for calculating and applying for FAFSA student aid,<sup>3</sup> and the end of race-based affirmative action in college admissions.<sup>4</sup>


If not college, where are these young people going? It’s clear that many are opting to go directly into the workforce, often into blue collar jobs that typically haven’t required further education.<sup>5</sup> The labor market has been in an upward swing favoring jobseekers, and it’s true that some well-known employers—such as Delta, IBM, Google, and Bank of America<sup>6</sup>—have dropped the degree requirement for entry-level employment. States like Maryland, New Jersey, Utah, and Virginia have also dropped degree requirements for most government jobs.

Awareness of this shift among employers may be giving some young people a boost in career optimism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, many more continue to be lost to the “opportunity youth” demographic: those age 16 to 24 who are neither persisting in education nor employed. The historical context behind the declining college enrollment trend remains to be written, but it’s quite clear we are in the midst of a significant shift.



## What do young people want?

Whether or not they are clear in their decision-making, and whether or not they have a strong understanding of all the options before them, many Gen Z youth are looking for faster, more economical, and more relevant on-ramps to meaningful jobs that offer life-sustaining wages and are aligned to their real interests. They want opportunities to learn and grow while working and earning—options that do not require them to put their lives on hold for four years and accumulate life-changing debt in the process. In this way, nondegree pathways hold promise to meet the demands of this generation of young people and of the employers that form the backbone of the economy.



A higher proportion of female non-pathway respondents than male non-pathway respondents reported that their high school did not encourage pathways (25% vs. 18%).

## Young people want the promise of another way.

So it is safe to say that the traditional four-year degree pathway is losing its appeal. Yet, unless information about other high-quality and viable post-school options is put before young people in a widespread manner, the trend of forgoing college may not be one to celebrate. Until employers overturn their practice of hiring extensively from pools of candidates with degrees, it will remain true that college graduates fare better on average (75% higher lifetime earnings) than those who forgo college, albeit with wide discrepancies by race and gender.<sup>8</sup> And, in the immediate future, a large decline in college graduates seems likely to exacerbate widespread labor shortages.<sup>9</sup>

There must be another way—a different future for those who are about to leave school and hope to enter the workforce, and a different array of credentials that employers can use to vet the skills and competencies of prospective hires.

And there is another way. A degree need not be the only pathway that matters. A set of options—many of which have existed for a long time but have never received the fanfare or widespread societal acceptance of four-year college degrees—is showing great promise, giving young people the ability to connect learning and earning and achieve greater purpose in their employment journeys.

## When it comes to pathways, there's (still) an information void.

Despite the early promise and appeal of pathways, there is a pervasive and persistent lack of awareness about the nondegree options on the table and how to judge their quality. Those options include certification programs, boot camps, apprenticeships, and competency-based learning credentials.

Indicative of the general confusion among young people about such options, nearly a quarter of respondents to our survey said their need to focus on work is a barrier to pursuing a pathway. The irony, of course, is that pathways often provide young people with the opportunity to begin earning while they learn. What young people don't know may be hurting them.

Two in three non-pathway youth in our survey said they would have considered a nondegree pathway if they had known more about it. The desire to know more is even evident among those still in school. Research from ECMC Group, for example, shows that nearly half (48%) of high school students wish their school would provide guidance on pathways, including nondegree and career options.<sup>10</sup> And ASA research shows that nearly half of Gen Z youth in K-12 schools said they don't have enough information to make plans for after high school.<sup>11</sup>

As higher education struggles to redefine itself and attract applicants, there is a risk of an informational black hole emerging, impeding students' ability to plan and prepare for their future careers along other pathways. Frustratingly, this dearth of information is especially harmful for the vast pool of students not planning to pursue college—those for whom the financial and personal stakes of professional failure are high and who have so much to gain from finding career success.

Young people pursuing pathways identified friends as among their sources of influence for career and education options more often than non-pathway respondents (55% vs. 50%). However, female pathway respondents reported being influenced by friends even more so (60%). A higher proportion of female pathway respondents also reported going to their parents for guidance (67% compared with 63% of male respondents), but a smaller percentage of female pathway respondents went to a counselor or mentor (13% compared with 20% of male respondents).



# Education to Career Pathways: The Vision

All young people today need the skills to participate in, adapt to, and thrive in an increasingly complicated and rapidly changing workforce. Accepting and embracing this will bring about a democratization of success that will benefit more people from a wider diversity of backgrounds and life circumstances. The democratization of success rests not on our ability to get all kids enrolled in college. Instead, it rests on our ability to lead all youth to the post-school pathway that is best placed to help them better know themselves; build and sharpen their durable, transferable, and occupation-specific skills; and discover their passions. Personalized pathways—not one-size-fits-all models—are the vision, as is a career-oriented education landscape where credentials can be unlocked as desired or needed, and where such credentials may be stacked and carried with a person for the duration of their career and applied to any future education and training.



## Why pathways?

Beyond the obvious—that the “college for all” mindset leaves much to be desired—the research in this paper points to the strong promise of pathways in their own right. Young people who pursue pathways report greater confidence in their future and report less unemployment and a higher degree of satisfaction with their choice. And they report feeling prepared for work. Thus, pathway programs stand to benefit not just individuals but also the employers that hire them.

People pursuing these pathways also have the ability to start earning while they build their skill set. For example, a Bureau of Labor Statistics data table shows that the median annual wage for apprentices in all occupations is higher than the median for all workers nationally, ranging from \$35,000 to around \$71,000.<sup>12</sup> Apprentices also have the chance to train under skilled mentors.

While apprenticeship programs have long been offered in the trades, they are increasingly available to young people in occupations like IT/cybersecurity, health care, education, and business management. Similarly, those pursuing licenses, certificates, and certifications can leverage that education to have more of a say in how their paycheck grows. A young professional who earns a competency-based certification while employed can expect a significant boost in salary, ranging from 5% to as much as 20%, depending on role and certification type.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, pathways often give young people something that is all too rare: the chance to build social capital and build a powerful network of mentors, advocates, and like-minded professionals who can help them navigate their journey and use their newfound knowledge and skill to advance their career.



# The Research

On behalf of American Student Assistance(R) (ASA) and JFF, Morning Consult surveyed over 1,100 non-college youth to learn about their post-high school education preferences.

The survey explored the preferences, feelings, and perceptions of three groups:



## 1. Non-college youth:

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Those neither enrolled nor graduated from a college (encompasses all our survey respondents)



## 2. Pathway youth:

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Those who pursued or are pursuing any nondegree postsecondary pathway (describes 558 of our survey respondents)



## 3. Non-pathway youth:

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Those who didn't pursue or aren't pursuing any nondegree postsecondary pathway (describes 561 of our survey respondents)

These three terms are used throughout this paper.

## Here's what we asked...

Among other things, we asked survey respondents questions about their reasons for not pursuing or finishing college, the priorities in their education and career journeys, and barriers to continuing their education. We also asked them about their satisfaction with their post-school choices, the drivers of that level of satisfaction, how confident they were, and whether they felt prepared for the workforce. Further, we asked them about their sources of information about pathways and how much they thought high school prepared them to make a choice.

Here's what we learned...

# Deep Dive: The Research

## Finding 1.

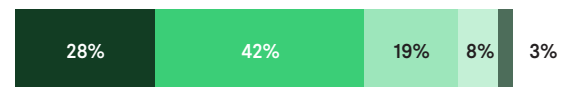
### *Young people in pathways feel confident.*

Gen Z youth in pathways feel confident in themselves, their plans, and their future. This is an encouraging finding, given that confidence among Gen Z youth is generally reported to be quite low. (A 2020 survey by ASA, for example, revealed that most Gen Z young people between the ages of 13 and 24 indicated that on a scale of 1 to 10, they rated their level of confidence between 5.9 and 6.4, lower than their levels of stress or anxiety.<sup>14</sup>

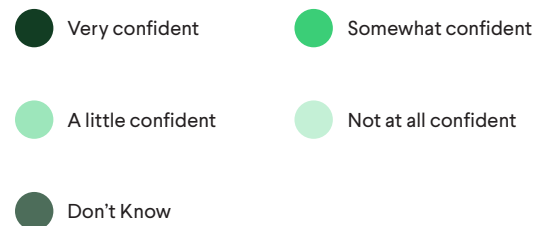
However, 70% of youth respondents who have chosen to pursue a pathway reported in this survey that they have high confidence in their post-high school plans. This is also substantially higher than the confidence of non-pathway respondents (57%).

A higher proportion of pathway students felt confident when asked if they know the steps they need to take to transition to their post-high school path.

#### ALL PATHWAY



#### ALL NON-PATHWAY



Among young people pursuing pathways, Black youth report the highest sense of preparation for the workforce: 33% of Black pathway youth said they felt “very prepared” compared with 24% of white pathway youth, for example.





## Jordan's Story: Building a Foundation of Employable Skills

Jordan is a 23-year-old Black man living in Boston. He graduated from high school and, like so many young people, went straight to college, planning to major in computer science. However, his college experience was one defined by feelings of solitude and a lack of support. Ultimately, he left college before completing a degree.

"In college, you're leading it by yourself," he shares. "You really don't have anybody. It is your choice to go to class or not."

Jordan's next move was based less on preconceived ideas about success and more on evidence. He had heard from friends about [Year Up](#), a tuition-free, skills-focused, career-aligned training program that helps young people find and pursue a career path. Participants are given a stipend during the program, and according to Year Up, some 80% of graduates are either employed or enrolled in postsecondary education within four years of graduation.<sup>15</sup>

"A bunch of my friends did it, and to this day, they have fabulous jobs," he explains. "Probably 10 people [in my high school class] did Year Up and still have a job making a good amount of money."

Once in the program, Jordan experienced support that he says far outweighed what he received in college. He also engaged in hands-on work and built the foundations of an in-demand skill set that includes advanced Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint, public speaking, and project management fundamentals.

When asked how well the program prepared him for whatever may be his next step, Jordan says, "Year Up has prepared me to do everything I wanted to do in life."

## Finding 2.

### *Young people in pathways perceive that they are workforce-ready.*

Pathways are equipping young people for the workforce in meaningful ways. True, and self-perceived, workforce readiness is a rare commodity today, even among degree obtainers. In fact, in a 2023 survey of young professionals who had attended college, some 39% felt their college experience failed to help them develop the skills to prepare them for the emotional or behavioral impact of transitioning to the workplace.<sup>16</sup>

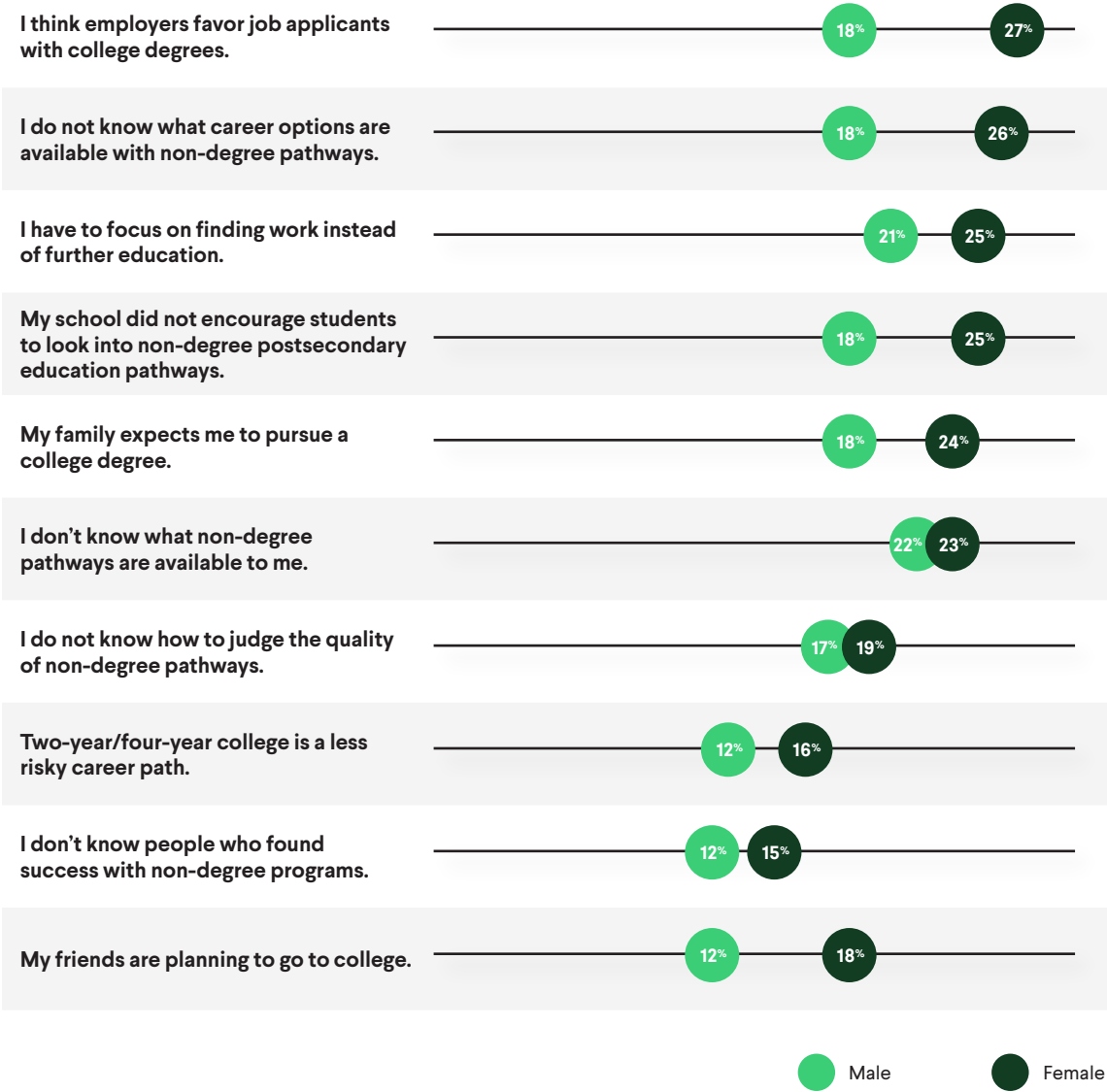
Yet, nearly three in four (71%) of our pathway respondents said they believe they are prepared for the workforce. Why such strong feelings of workforce readiness among pathway youth? It may be more than a matter of perception. International studies have shown that employees who have participated in work-based learning require less training, do better quality work, and have more—and broader—skills than other recruits.<sup>17</sup> Here's what one pathway completer had to say about their workforce readiness:

A higher proportion of female non-pathway respondents than male non-pathway respondents believe that employers favor job applicants with a college degree (27% vs. 18%).

“  
*[In a pathway], you are more likely to get the skills and connections needed for your preferred career.*  
”



# A higher proportion of female non-pathway students reported employers favoring job applicants with college degrees as a barrier to accessing non-degree programs.



### **Finding 3.**

#### *A higher proportion of pathway youth report being employed.*

Pathways are showing promise in terms of helping people access the labor market and giving them a boost in their employment status. This is particularly important at a time when many young people feel the need to begin earning while they learn.

Gen Z youth, in fact, are very motivated by salary,<sup>18</sup> and there's a good reason behind it. The financial implications many young Americans face are stark. BBC writes of American Gen Z youth that they "have found themselves in a unique position among generations. They've grown up watching their parents, largely Gen Xers, struggle with money amidst economic downturns; now, they've graduated into their own economic turbulence and are worried

about securing their futures. As a result, they're demanding more remuneration from their employers than ever, and at earlier stages in their career."

The good news for youth who need and want to work but are looking for a different route than the traditional college experience? Pathway youth surveyed reported less unemployment than non-pathway youth. More pathway youth (65%) said they are working part or full time, compared with 51% of non-pathway youth.

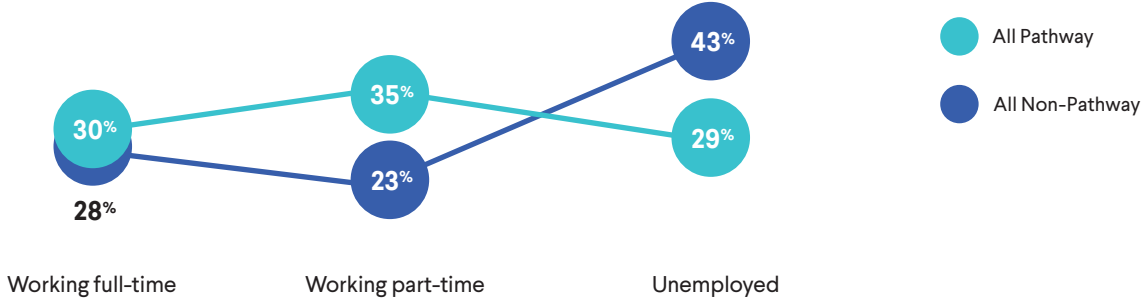
Attachment to the labor market is a vital necessity for today's youth. Regardless of a person's starting point, the access to education and training that pathways offer can quickly lead to opportunities for advancement and the chance to realize financial stability. And critically, pathways allow young people to achieve this without necessarily having the burden of student loan debt on their shoulders from the moment they enter the workforce.

## HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE LEARNING ABOUT THEIR OPTIONS?

Nearly 30% of non-pathway youth said they didn't receive information and resources that would help them decide on their post-high school options, compared with just 20% of pathway youth. But how are non-college youth receiving information?

- They're searching the web (87%)
- They're watching online videos (81%)
- They're getting guidance from their parents (66%)
- They're being influenced by friends (52%), teachers (41%), relatives (34%), counselors 24%), employers (16%), and mentors (15%)

A higher proportion of non-pathway students reported being unemployed.





## Yssa's Story: The Power of Trying New Things

Yssa is a 23-year-old multiracial Black woman living in New York City and working as a software engineering apprentice at an advertising company. She attended a small charter high school that encouraged students to explore a variety of postsecondary programs, including pathways. After high school, Yssa enrolled in an associate's degree program. While it helped her with learning how to be disciplined, she felt that the rigid structure wasn't a good fit for her learning style. Still, she persevered.

After completing her degree, she used her online research skills to find and enroll in a tuition-free, six-month, intensive web development boot camp called Opportunity College. She found the program to be "fast-paced but effective."

However, the speed was part of the draw.

"It's 2023—I wanted quick results," she explains, alluding to many young people's belief that they need to begin working and earning sooner. Through the boot camp, she learned both technical and soft skills, like those needed for the interview process. While others in her cohort didn't find employment right away, Yssa did.

"When you come into these pathways, you have to realize that you still have a lot of work to do," she says.

Yssa acknowledges that for people of color, the decision to attend or not attend college can come with extra challenges. Yet, she still wouldn't hesitate to recommend people search for and pursue options that transcend the traditional college experience.

"Being in the Black community, college has always been a goal your family wants you to accomplish, because at one point, we weren't able to get those degrees," Yssa says. "As a Black person maneuvering through life, a college degree is the ultimate accomplishment. But it shouldn't be anymore."

As for what she would tell any young person starting out on their journey?

"Talk to people who have done it first. Go to an [employer] event and talk to the people who work there. You can start networking now. ... I wish I could have discovered all of the pathways before I started my journey."



## Finding 4.

### *Pathway program models show promise as high-impact options that meet students' needs, wants, and circumstances.*

Non-college youth respondents identified the need to earn a good salary, incur fewer costs, work in a field of interest, and have a flexible class schedule as their most important considerations when looking at post-high school education options.

In addition to the earning power described above, pathway programs can give young people the kind of schedule flexibility and circumstantial practicality they want and need. Boot camps, for example, can often fit around a person's existing schedule, enabling them to upskill in short bursts (often lasting a matter of days or weeks) and without much, if any, loss of productivity or income. Certification programs

are often conducted online and frequently incentivized and paid for by employers, who themselves stand to benefit from workers' new credentials.

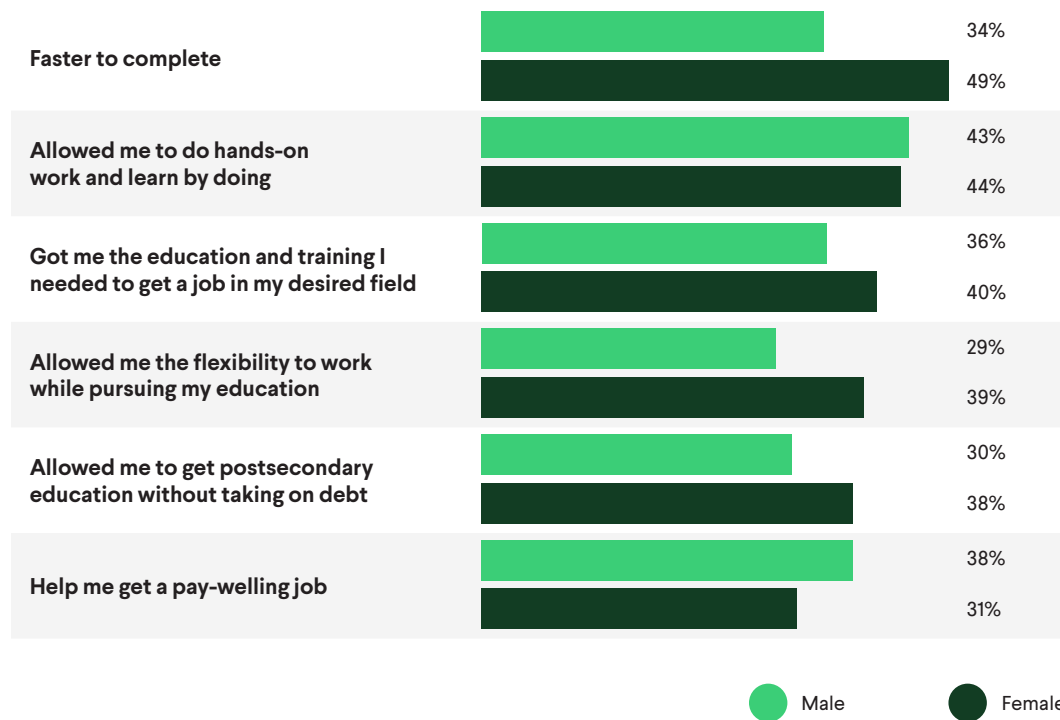
However, these models also offer a type of learning that appeals to those who want to ensure that any investment in their education will pay off in immediately relevant ways—namely, hands-on learning. Why does this real-world experience matter so much? Because it works, and it lets people get to work: While the average retention rate of learning by lecture (a standard in higher education) is 5%, the average retention rate of learning by doing (a standard in many pathway programs) is near 75%.

Of our survey respondents, more pathway youth than non-pathway youth identified hands-on learning as important. Across pathway youth respondents, around one in three had pursued a certification (31%) or certificate (33%), while 20% had pursued a competency-based license.

More female pathway respondents than male pathway respondents identified “faster to complete” as the reason for satisfaction with pathways (49% vs. 34%).



**A higher proportion of female pathway students reported “faster to complete” as their main reason for their satisfaction with their non-degree pathway**



“

*You will get a chance to figure yourself out and what you want to do, and if you change your mind, there are less financial complications and time restraints.*”

– Pathway youth survey respondent

### Erick's Story: Where Skills Meet Social Capital

Erick is a 22-year-old Black man from Detroit. He works as an IT support specialist—an occupation with an average salary of \$57,000 nationally.<sup>19</sup> Erick's story is like that of many young people starting out on their career journey, in that he was not asked about his career plans in high school but was strongly encouraged to attend college. Yet, his story took a different turn when he eventually saw evidence that there was another way and decided to pursue it.

“My school pushed college,” he explains. “To even graduate, we had to be accepted to three colleges. I just thought it was what I had to do.”

When Erick experienced a personal tragedy, he chose not to pursue college. Without knowing exactly what to do, he explored a few avenues, including warehouse work, a job at Home Depot, and door-to-door sales. However, he became inspired by seeing his brother find gainful employment through [NPower](#), an IT training and certification program that aims to “create pathways to economic prosperity by launching digitally oriented careers for veterans and young people from underserved communities.”<sup>20</sup>

NPower is a virtual tuition-free, instructor-led educational model. To promote success, NPower students are assigned mentors. In addition to the industry-recognized certifications they earn, they receive career readiness, self-development, and skills-building support. Importantly, the program helps students build social capital and find jobs with area employers through a job placement assistance program.

Erick completed the NPower training in four months. The program helped him unlock both technical and professional skills that he believes have been invaluable in launching his early career and that will set him up for job security in the future. He explains that, thanks to the NPower employer network, he had access to jobs that might not have otherwise been available to him.

While Erick says he may eventually pursue a degree in computer science, he is weighing all the evidence both for and against the option—including the earning power and employment status of degree-holders compared with people who don't have a degree—and will decide accordingly. For now, he is pleased to be in a place where he is both earning and learning on the job.

Does Erick regret not going to college right after high school? “Knowing what I know now,” he says, “I don't think there is anything I missed out on.”



## **Finding 5.** *Pathways yield high satisfaction for students.*

A promising finding from our research: Those who pursue pathways are finding satisfaction with their chosen work experiences and early career paths. Nearly all (nine in 10) respondents are satisfied with the pathway they are pursuing or pursued. Why such high satisfaction? The top reasons were the opportunity for hands-on learning—44% cited this—and the ability to complete faster.

While data around pathway satisfaction is encouraging, young people's overall sense of satisfaction with their chosen pathway is best explained in their own words. To bring the pathways to life, we interviewed some of the people who have pursued them, spotlighting boot camps, certification programs, and apprenticeships. Here are their stories.

A higher proportion of female pathway respondents than male pathway respondents identified real-world work experiences as being important (35% vs. 27%).





## Nadia's Story: The Ups and Downs of Taking the Road Less Traveled

Nadia is a 22-year-old Black Indian American woman who lives in Rhode Island. She currently works as a contract UX designer apprentice for a large multinational technology company. The road to where she currently is, she says, has been anything but traditional.

Upon leaving high school, Nadia prioritized being close to her family and the need to care for her younger siblings over going to college. Instead, she found a teaching internship that allowed her to fulfill her passion of helping others. Like many others, however, she was forced to leave her internship when the pandemic started and found a job as an essential worker, which she felt was a more stable choice at the time, at a gas station. This choice ultimately proved unfulfilling but motivated her to find something different.

After speaking with a mentor from her internship who knew about her interest in computer science, she decided to apply for an internship with a large tech company. Nadia attended an apprenticeship fair and learned about UX design, something that would allow her to merge both of her passions: helping people and working in technology. She learned which design credentials the company provided for free and scoured LinkedIn to understand the sector and the company influencers who could potentially help her in her career journey. These activities, she says, set her up for a successful interview.

"I knew I wasn't formally trained in design at all so I had to stand out in a different way," Nadia explains.

Once in the apprenticeship program, Nadia learned the fundamentals of design and says she was able to quickly catch up to those who had been to design school. After a year, she ended her apprenticeship and was hired into a contract role.

Today, Nadia is ready to enter the workforce in a more formal capacity and is currently searching for full-time roles. Despite her experience and on-the-job education, she has experienced rejection from employers that still require a four-year degree or six years of experience in lieu of a degree—effectively barring talented and qualified pathway candidates from applying.

While Nadia has something many degree holders don't—hands-on experience—she notes, "The piece of paper is still really important. It is upsetting because I know that it is either get the piece of paper from the college or spend more money on individual certifications, and I don't know which is worth it at this point in my life."

She adds that if employers were more open to hiring people without degrees, she would feel more comfortable putting herself out there for entry-level roles. However, Nadia doesn't regret taking the road less traveled by people in her chosen field:

"If I went to college, I wouldn't have had such a fulfilling life so far."



To learn more, visit the [Expand Opportunities Hub](#).

# Endnotes

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- 5 Harriet Torry, “More High-School Grads Forgo College in Hot Labor Market,” The Wall Street Journal, May 29, 2023, [www.wsj.com/articles/more-high-school-grads-forgo-college-in-hot-labor-market-c052c773](http://www.wsj.com/articles/more-high-school-grads-forgo-college-in-hot-labor-market-c052c773).
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