

What Today's Learners Want: Insights to Shape Pathways Programs that Work



Research Findings

Young people across the country are navigating high-stakes choices about their futures, often with limited exposure to the full range of opportunities available to them. This resource distills key findings from national research on how learners think about career education and training programs: what they value, what gets in their way, and what moves them to act. It offers powerful, research-backed insights to help organizations design, position, and promote programs in ways that resonate more deeply and drive stronger results.

You can use these insights to inform your program design, messaging, partnerships, outreach, and strategy, ensuring you meet learners where they are and move them toward action.

Research Methodology:

These findings draw from an 18-month research effort that included:

- A landscape analysis of narrative, attitudinal research, media coverage, and public opinion polling
- In-depth interviews with leaders who work in the field to better understand their communications successes and challenges
- A nationally representative message-testing survey, with 1,500 American adults and oversamples including 400 parents with children under the age of 25, 400 young learners ages 18-24, and 500 students between the ages of 14-17
- Roundtable discussions with high school students and young adult learners, segmented by urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds
- Pulse surveys to test key concepts, language, and ideas

Audience Insights

Seeking Security and Meaning

Young people are redefining what it means to succeed—raised amid uncertain and predictable times, they're making decisions about their careers and lives that offer security and meaning.

How It Shows Up

Learners are making decisions early on that lead to stable jobs and family lives that give them security and meaning.

In Their Own Words

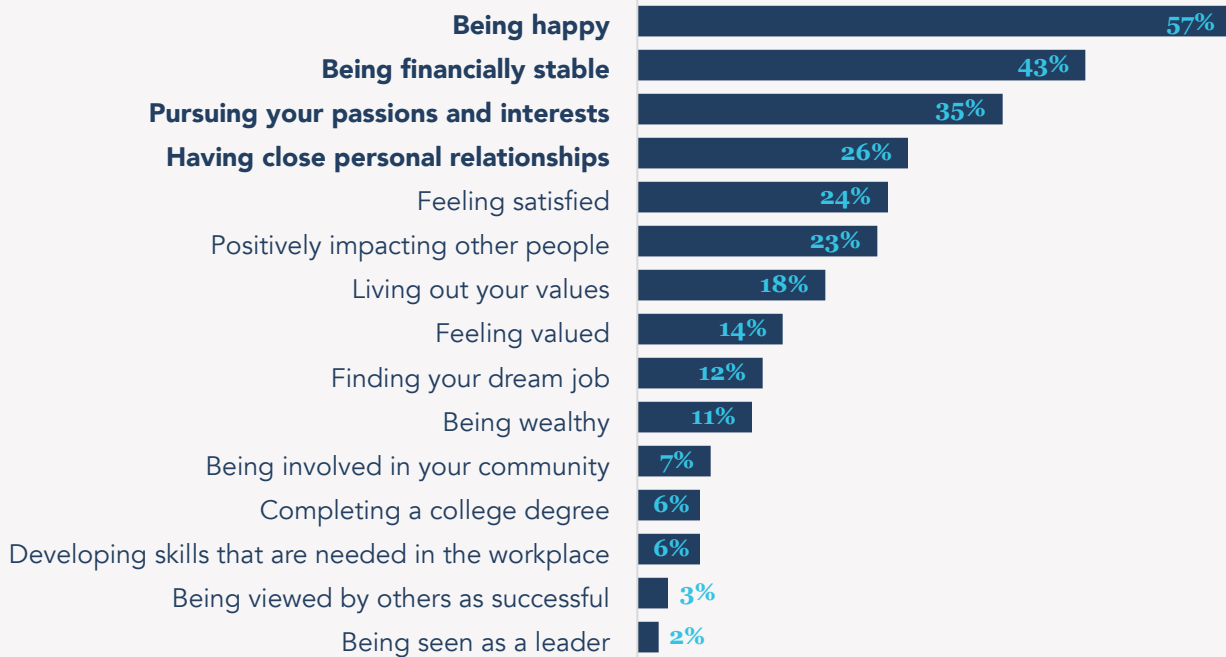
*[I want to] still [live] in California, **[be] married, own a home, and have cats.** As far as schooling, I have GenEd done, and I am going to go into specific classes for my major in addiction studies. I want job stability. I want that in my future, that's a big thing. Going to school has helped me feel like I have **a stable way of getting that.** Owning a home—in an indirect way, helps me feel successful.
—Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

*[I'd like to] work in a firm like Boeing as a biomedical engineer. As for location, it depends on which state pays more. I want to **get married, have kids, and have dogs.** —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience*

*I can picture myself having **a family and a house,** going to college to get my job, and maybe extra school.
—High School Learner*

They said that being happy, being financially stable, and having close personal relationships are the top factors that lead to a meaningful life—much higher than being wealthy, finding a dream job, or being seen as a leader.

In your opinion, which of the following elements are MOST important to living a “meaningful life”? Select up to three.



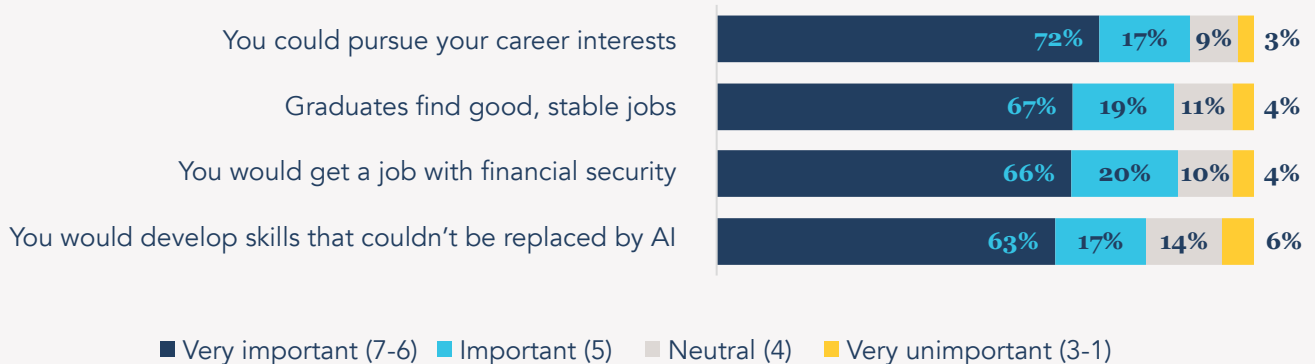
In addition to job security and being able to pursue their interests, learners want to make sure they choose a career that will never be replaced by new technology like AI.

In Their Own Words

[I worry about] jobs taken over by AI. Traditional trade jobs are safer from that perspective. —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience

If your line of work stops, [there is] not as much need for workers, you won't have much to do. If there's not as much demand...they don't need you as a worker anymore. —High School Learner

How important are each of the following as reasons to pursue a training or education program?



Learners would be more motivated to explore non-degree pathways programs if they knew they could lead to a secure and meaningful career with financial stability.

Please select each of the following that is true for you, personally. I would be more likely to explore pursuing career education and training programs other than college for myself if I knew... Select all that apply.



From “For Someone Else” to “For Me”

Young people see real value in non-degree pathways, but social norms and limited exposure can hold some back—until they see relatable stories that make the path feel possible, personal, and worth exploring.

How It Shows Up

Learners agree that nondegree pathways could be very impactful for them personally.

In Their Own Words

*It gives those who have decided that college isn't for them **a path to take.** —Young Adult, No Postsecondary Experience*

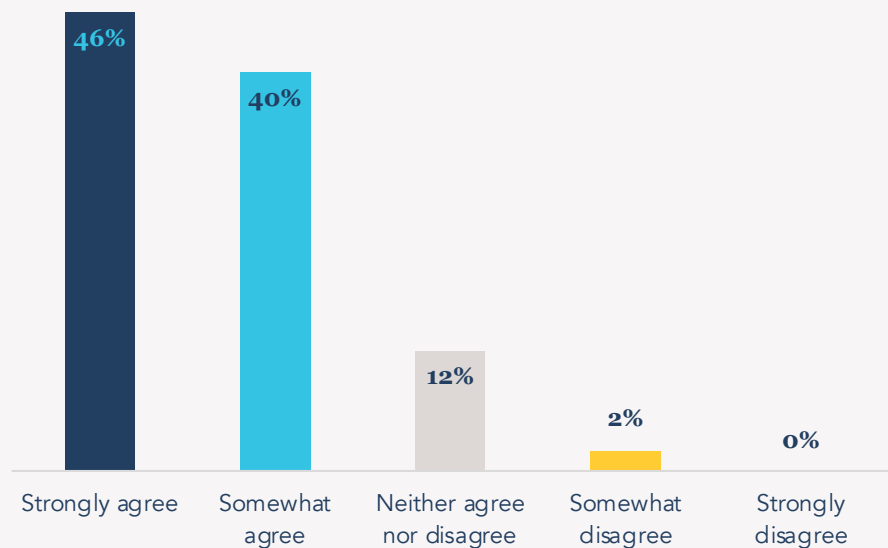
*I can gain skills that allow me to **make a good living.** —High School Learner*

*It could help me **get to the specific job I want faster.** —Young Adult, No Postsecondary Experience*

*I think that the non-degree is solid overall and **worth it too.** —High School Learner*

Almost half of learners strongly agree pathways could have an impact on their own life.

Based on what you know about non-degree pathways, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *Completing a non-degree pathway program could make a big impact on my own life.*



Yet, many learners still see nondegree programs as being for “someone else”: people who want to go into trades or don’t like traditional school.

In Their Own Words

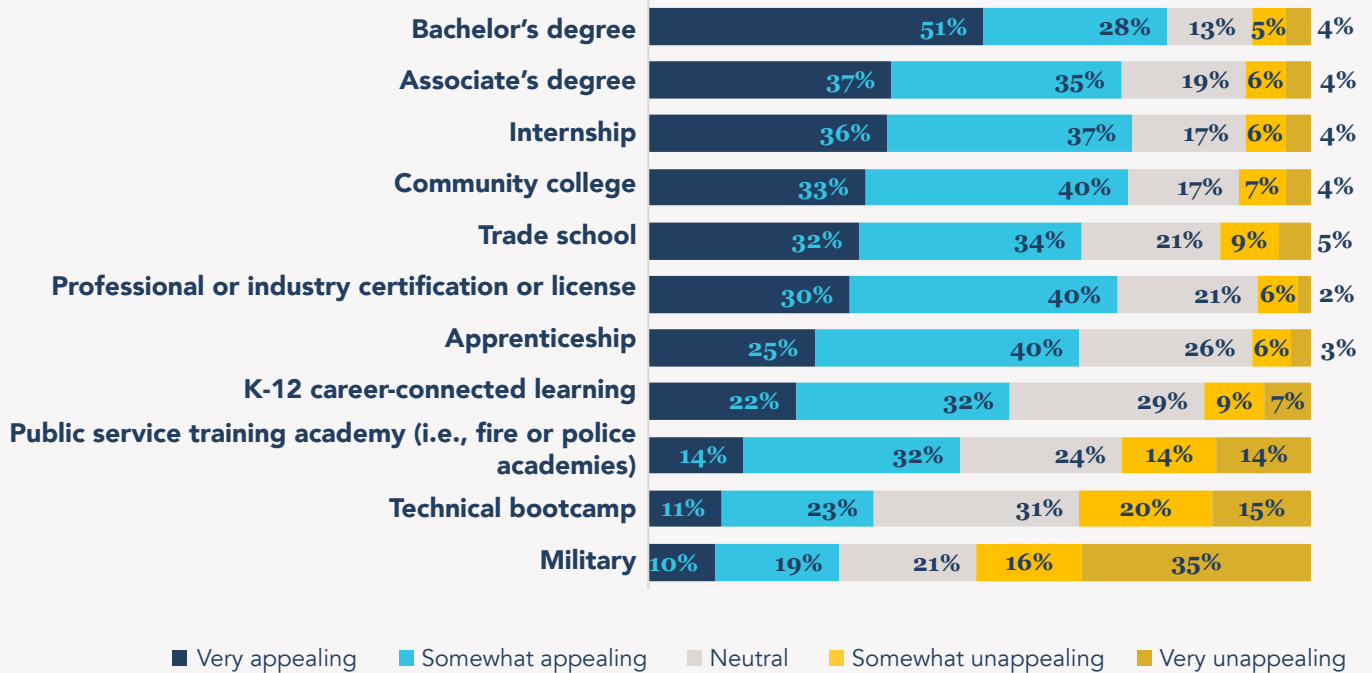
*[Pathway programs are] for people who are **hands-on**, who **don’t prefer to take the route of going to traditional college**, taking extra classes in something... where you’re trying a craft to go towards. —Young Adult, No Postsecondary Experience*

*I feel like [these programs are for] kids that—**no offense—care less about schoolwork**, and they just want to experience the real world and what it has to offer. —High School Learner*

*I think of [a] trade, like **plumber and carpenter**. —High School Learner*

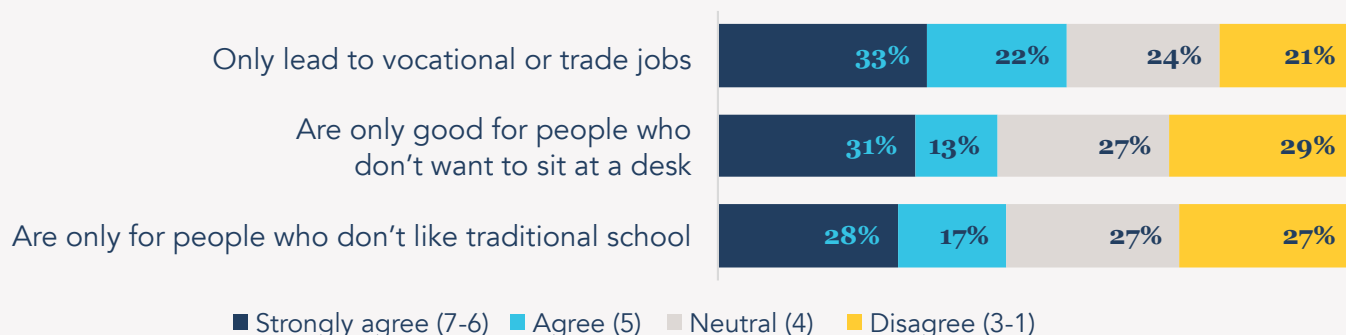
Yet, many learners still see nondegree programs as being for “someone else”: people who want to go into trades or don’t like traditional school.

How appealing or unappealing do you find each of the following education options for yourself, your child, or another close family member? (Very/somewhat appealing)



Around half agree that pathways are only good for vocational or trade jobs and non-traditional learners and workers.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes non-degree pathway programs.



Young people are largely learning about their education options from—and being influenced by—family, friends, and schools.

In Their Own Words

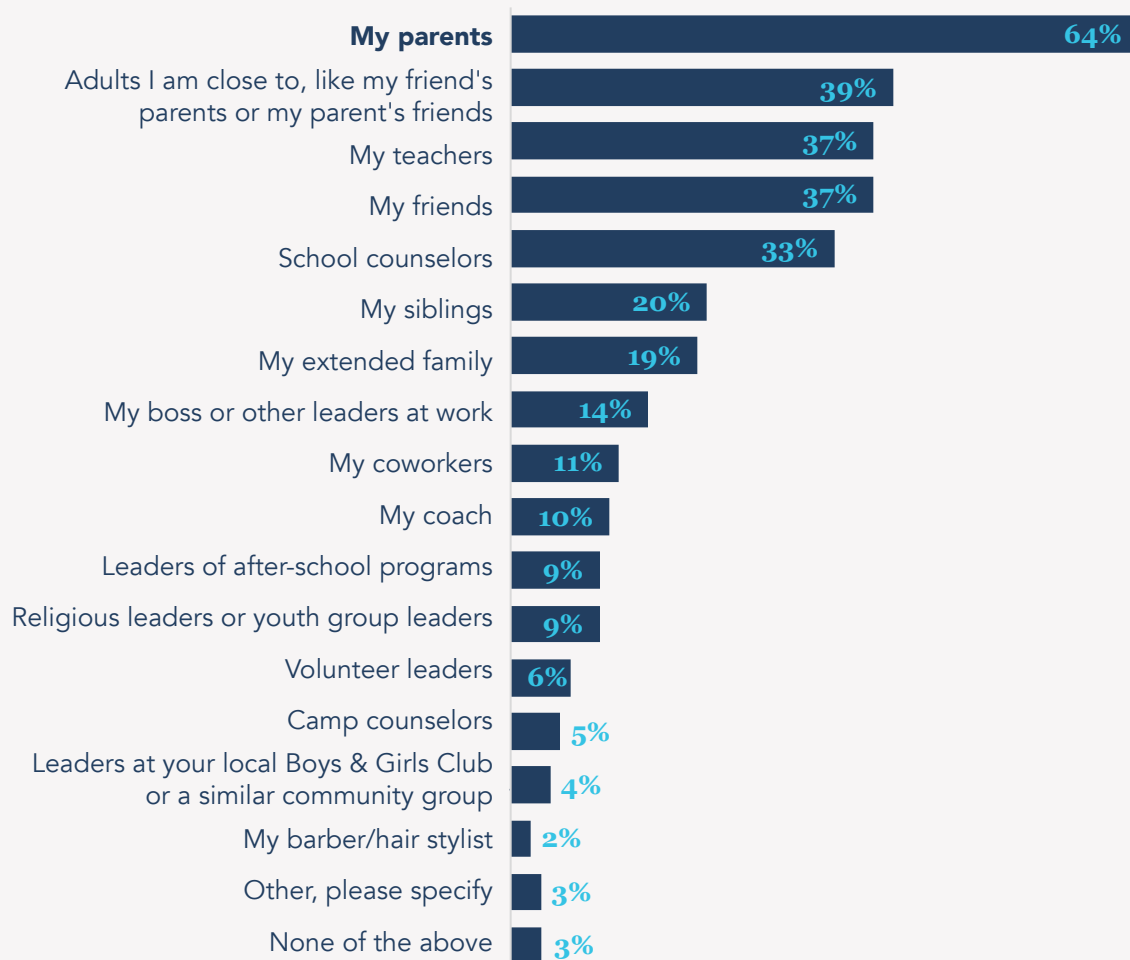
Most of my family has gone mostly this route [of being a nurse], and I am more familiar with this route. [It feels] more attractive to me. —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience

A family friend owns a structural engineering firm, and **my sister's boyfriend** works for an aerospace company, so I could see which ones I like more. —High School Learner

In my high school, we had a career center. You could go on a field trip to the community college and see what it was like. **I think that was also part of the reason that pushed me to go to community college.** —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program

Among them, parental advice is by far the most influential. Teachers and school counselors are also important, but don't carry nearly as much weight.

When it comes to making decisions about postsecondary education, whose advice would be most helpful?



Learners are very influenced—and inspired—by stories and conversations with people who have completed programs themselves.

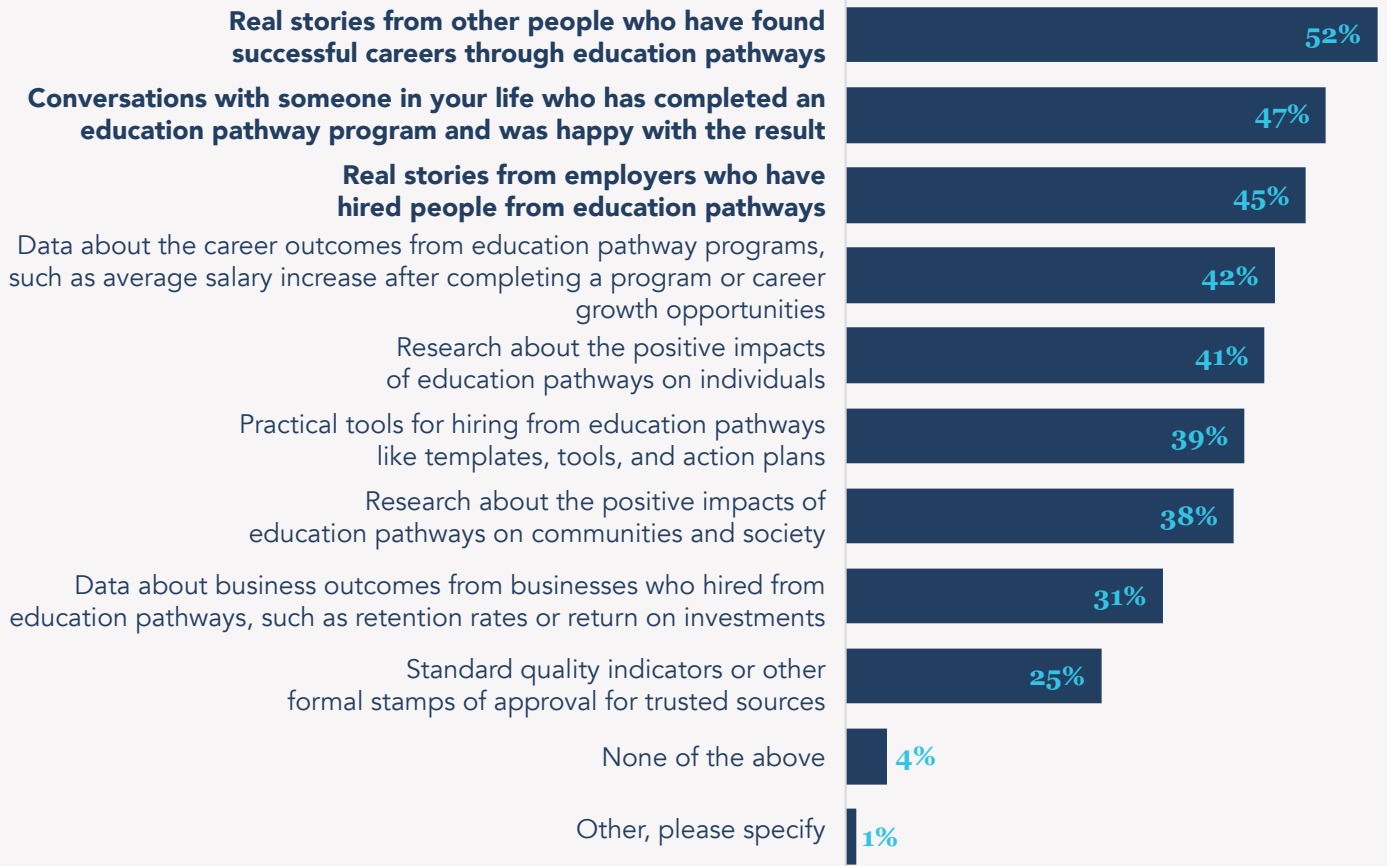
In Their Own Words

*It's a lot different to see [quotes from] someone who's actually gone through that kind of schooling to say something opposed to just writing about it...**It feels a lot more meaningful and real.** —High School Learner*

*They have the experience, so it's not artificial ... opinionated. **It's genuinely what they experienced.** —High School Learner*

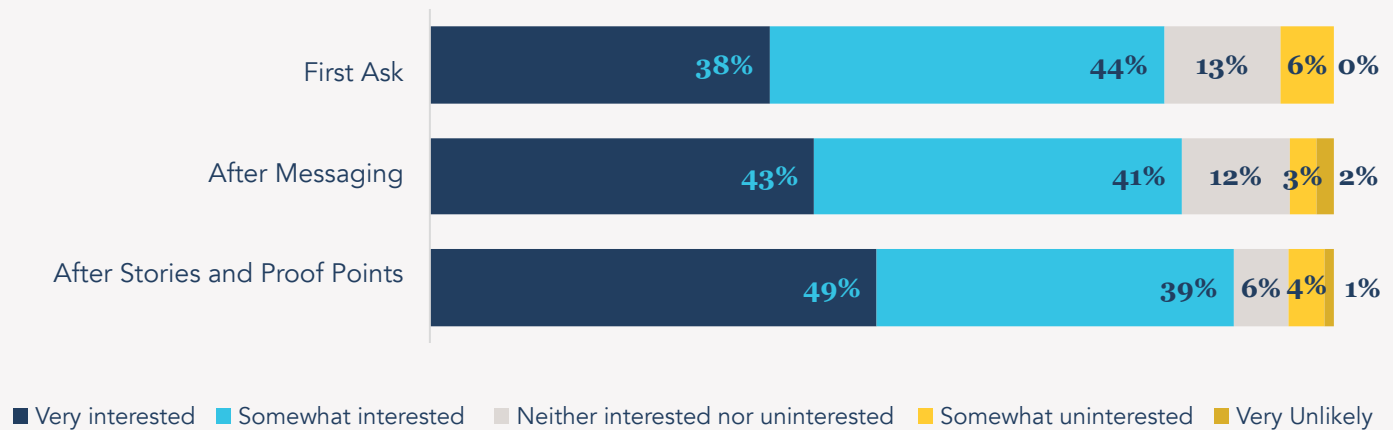
Success stories and conversations with people in their lives who have completed pathways programs help learners see the real benefits of pathways.

What would you need to see or hear to feel confident that education pathways could provide real benefits to people, businesses, and society? Select all that apply.



Almost half of learners say they are “very interested” in pursuing a non-degree pathway after hearing stories and proof points.

Based on what you know, how interested or uninterested are you personally in pursuing a non-degree pathway in the future?



Fast Track, Deep Impact

Learners see pathways as a practical option, but those who have completed pathways programs experience deep personal growth—gaining confidence, clarity, and purpose. But with just a little information, it’s not a huge leap for those who have not completed a program to believe and understand pathway programs as transformational, not just transactional.

How It Shows Up

Learners see pathway programs as a fast, practical option to achieve the success and financial stability they crave.

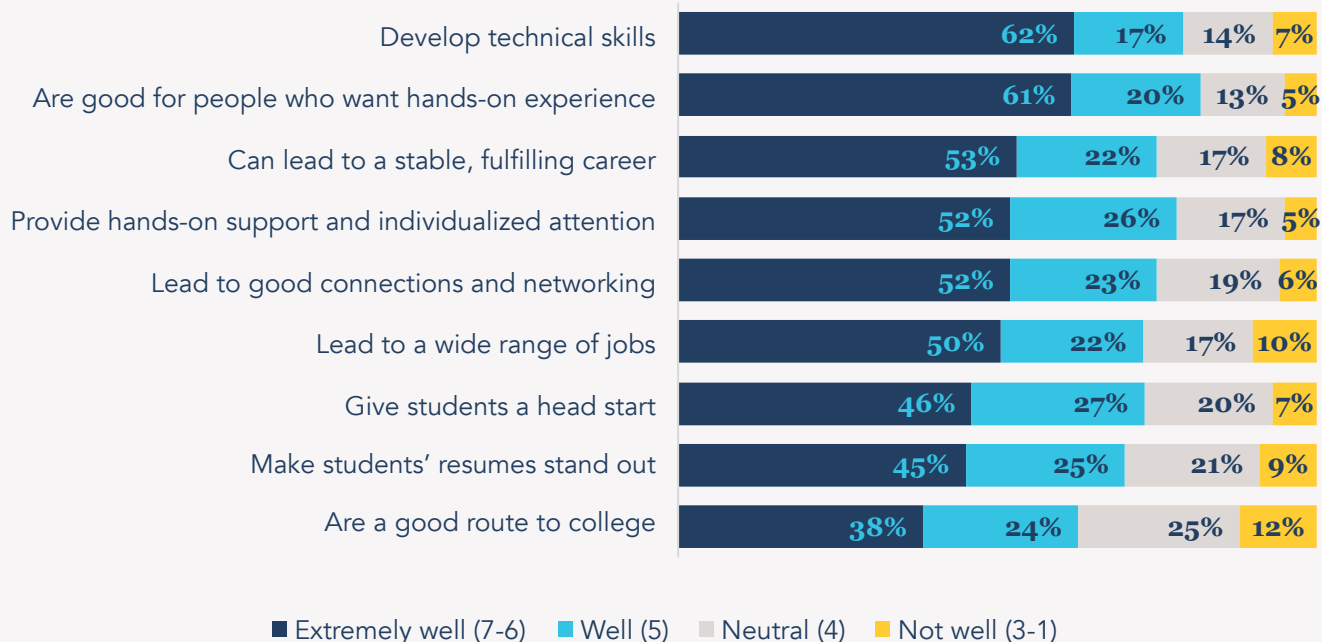
In Their Own Words

*I feel like these programs are more hands-on and for **fast-track** learners...instead of going to a four-year college and getting the same experience in a longer time period. —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience*

*It provides **a focused, accessible way** to gain valuable skills and credentials that can significantly improve your job prospects, career advancement opportunities, and overall earning potential, even without a full degree. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

When asked how well they think each of the statements describes non-degree pathway programs, benefits like developing technical skills, getting hands-on experience, and leading to a stable, fulfilling career are top-of-mind for learners.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes non-degree pathway programs.



But learners who have completed non-degree pathway programs described much broader, deeper and more transformational benefits—and hiring managers' point of view validate the value of those benefits.

In Their Own Words

*Trade school [gave me] an **overwhelming amount of support and a huge community**. The teachers that taught me [made me feel that] it's doable. It is just **very reassuring** and makes me **feel confident** in my vision and my dream. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

*They have connections to the healthcare field. I'm pretty much set—they have the network, and you're **set up to get a job** right after. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

*I felt **very confident** after graduation. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

*I went there for three months and it gave me structure and **guided me on what I wanted to do after high school**. Plus, I was given some college credits when I started college for the time in technical school. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

Communication skills—everyone has to a certain degree, but active listening, empathetic listening, and validation in a professional way, in an advanced way, are something you don't get unless you're in the field. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program

*I view them as **stepping stones**. Having a small experience helped build my confidence and gave me something to put on my resume. The next experience was more competitive and more related to what I wanted to do. By the time I applied for full-time positions, I had more experience than just classes, which helped **set me apart from other applicants** for my current job and taught me stuff along the way. —Young Adult, Completed Pathway Program*

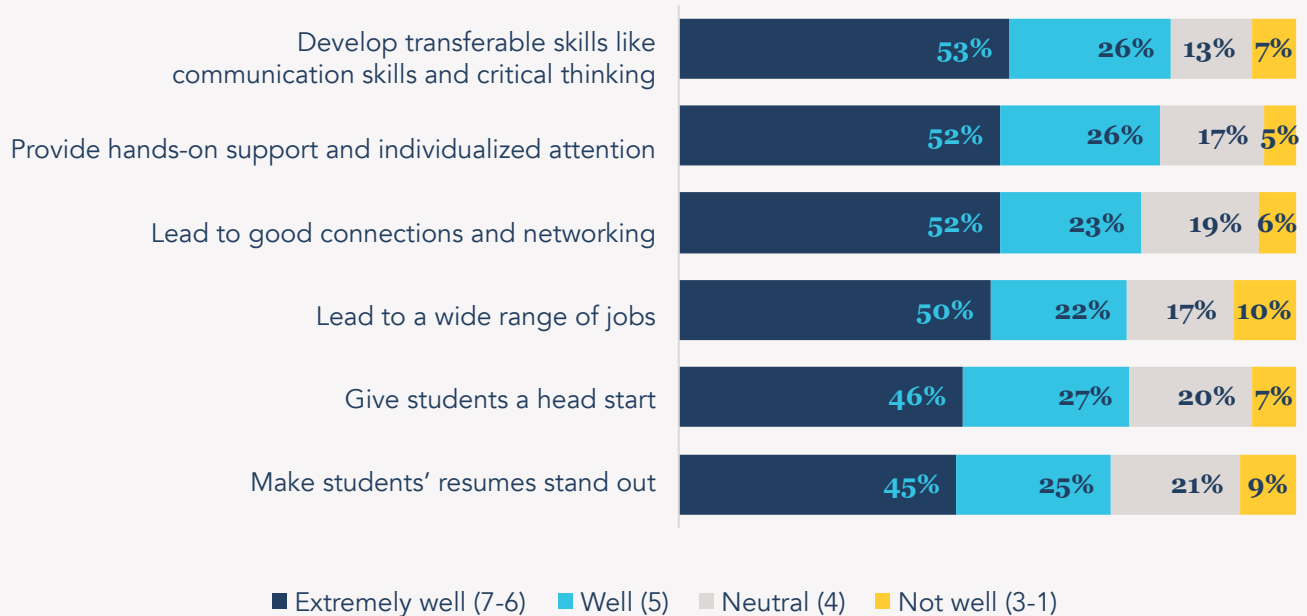
*Because I think that in many cases, college degrees are unnecessary, and quite frankly overrated. **Someone who began developing skills right out of high school might have more of a proven track record** than someone who spent four years in school learning things that might be unnecessary for the job. —Hiring Manager*

*We have found that many **college graduates are less motivated to perform well** than non-college educated. —Hiring Manager*

*We look for **hard working, smart and ambitious people**. Degrees don't always reflect this. —Hiring Manager*

And it's not a big leap for all learners to believe in these deeper, less obvious benefits like developing soft skills, making connections, getting a head start, and standing out.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes non-degree pathway programs.



Buildable Path to College and Career

Without a clear understanding of what kinds of programs are out there or the careers they can lead to, young learners can feel either locked into college or lost about their future. Showing them that pathways are flexible, buildable routes to a wide variety of real careers helps them see non-degree pathways as a smart and relevant choice for any learner looking to jumpstart their career.

How It Shows Up

Hesitant learners often fall into one of two mindsets—they feel set on college and don't see pathways as part of their education and training; or they feel unsure about their future and don't want to feel locked into anything early on.

In Their Own Words

*I actually want to **graduate from a degree** program to become an engineer.
—Young Adult Learner*

*Because I'm **not really sure what I wanna be in future** but I wanna do something good. —High School Learner*

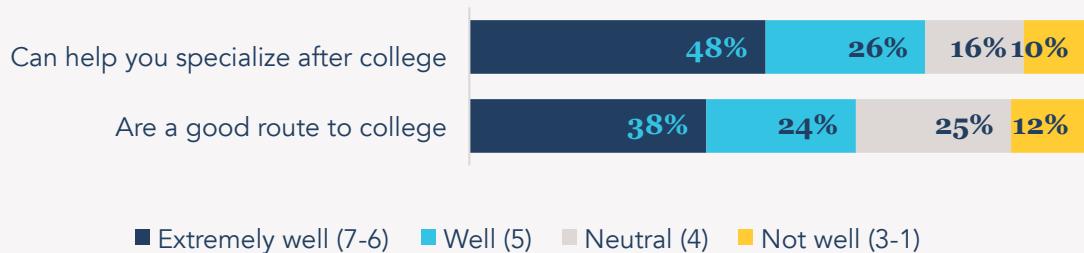
*I have already **zoned in on what I want to do with my life and what degree I need.**
—Young Adult Learner*

*I just don't want to **put all my eggs in one basket.** —Young Adult Learner*

***It's still so early.** I've got a ways before graduation so **I haven't made a decision** either way. —High School Learner*

When asked how well they think each of the statements describes non-degree pathway programs, benefits like developing technical skills, getting hands-on experience, and leading to a stable, fulfilling career are top-of-mind for learners.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes non-degree pathway programs.



Learners are largely unaware of the diversity of options that are available to them.

In Their Own Words

*I don't know **where to start** looking or **how many options there are** that are interesting to me.
—High School Learner*

***There are probably so many I don't know about** and just need some help finding it. —Young Adult Learner*

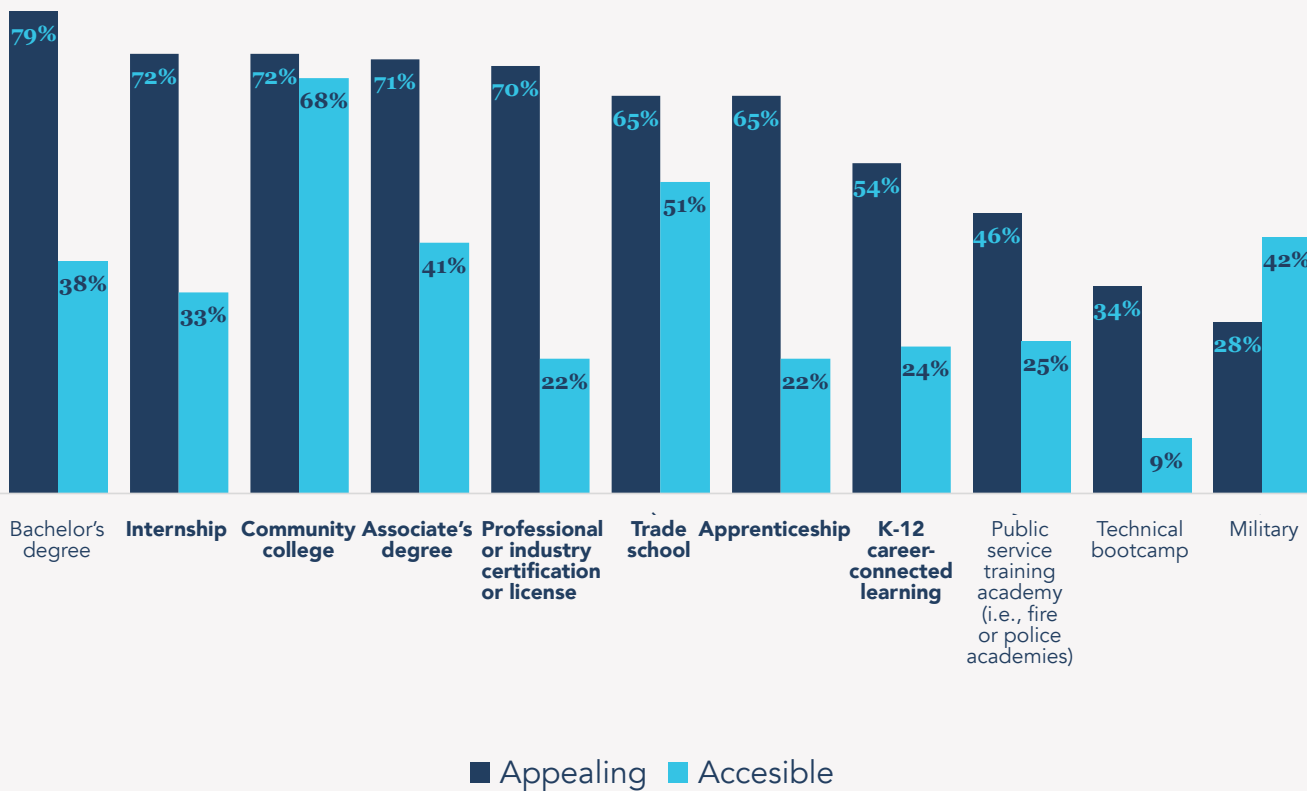
***I am having a hard time finding a trade school I can attend** in my field of choice. —Young Adult Learner*

*I am not sure **what I have available to me** at a career center. —High School Learner*

When different options are laid out plainly, learners find most of them appealing. However, there is a huge gap in what they find appealing and what they think is accessible and available to them.

How appealing or unappealing do you find each of the following education options for yourself, your child, or another close family member?

Which of the following education options do you think are **easily available and accessible** to you, your child, or another close family member?



Seeing all kinds of career options non-degree pathway programs can lead to is eye-opening and helps them see how pathways could be an important part of their future.

Learners were shown this list of potential jobs non-degree pathway programs can lead to during the roundtables.

- Artist
- Chef
- Carpenter
- Content Creator
- Aesthetician or other beauty professional
- Retail Merchandiser
- Interior Designer
- Real Estate Agent
- Nurse
- Patient Care Technician
- Teacher's Assistant
- College and Career Specialist
- Aircraft Lunch and Recovery Specialists
- Aircraft Mechanics and Service Technicians
- Captain, Mate and Pilot of Ships
- Computer Programmer
- Data Analyst
- Software Engineer/ Developer
- Product Manager
- Product Designer
- Sales Manager
- Plumber
- Electrician
- Ai Technologist
- Solar Panel Installer
- Welder
- Dental Hygiene Technician
- X-Ray Technician
- Microchip Manufacturer
- Warehouse Logistic Manager
- Clerck in a Government Office
- Corthouse Stenographer
- Police
- Firefighter
- Military
- Quality Insurance Engineer

In Their Own Words

*It was surprising to me. I wasn't expecting that you wouldn't have to go to college for all of the medical field. It's **eye-opening that there are so many more possibilities** to get those [careers]. —High School Learner*

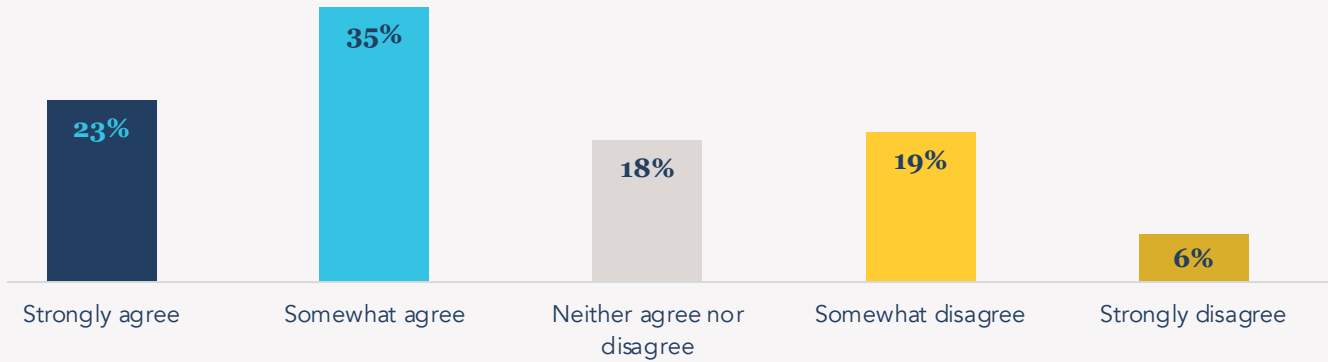
*I didn't know you could get a certificate [for Paramedic]. **I thought you had to get a bachelor's** and be in medicine or something. —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience*

*I guess I didn't consider that I can do nursing without college. **I feel like you have to go to college at least to get a biology degree or something [to do] nursing.** —Young Adult, No Post-Secondary Experience*

But they still need practical information and logistical information to help them get started.

Less than a quarter feel confident they know how to get started.

Based on what you know about non-degree pathways, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
I know how to get started exploring non-degree pathways programs.



In Their Own Words

*I would want to know **how to get started** with education pathways and **how to get in touch with contacts** to learn more. —Young Adult Learner*

*I would need to know **how to find and apply** to these programs. —High School Learner*

*How much would it **cost**? Would it all be worth it in the end? —High School Learner*

*I will need to know the **program credibility and success rate**. —High School Learner*