LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Summary of Community Listening • Fall 2024

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The goal of the **Life After High School** **project from Open Campus is twofold:** to understand how young people learn about their career and college options after high school, and to explore possible ways to improve the quality of and access to that information. In our first two phases of the project, which included research and listening work from March-November 2024, we focused on that first goal. We set out to understand what information is out there, how trustworthy and comprehensive it is, how people are accessing it, and what gaps might exist.

We focused on Chicago and Houston, with some additional research in rural Texas. We chose Chicago and Houston because they are large, diverse cities with rich community networks. By focusing on these cities, we hoped to gather a wide range of perspectives and understand the unique information needs of their residents.

Next year in Phase 3, we will use the learnings from the listening phase to prototype possible solutions to fill information gaps and disseminate trusted, local, and independent information about post-high school education and career training options to those who need it most.

Our research was supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and American Student Assistance.

Phase 1 Recap

Process and Methodology

We developed an "anchor" for the rest of the project in the form of initial interviews with experts and community members. These initial interviews:

1. Provided a landscape overview and illuminated key themes to continue exploring in Phase 2; and

2. Led to more connections and conversations to further build out the input piece of the project, especially among community members.

A note on language

*We use the term **"expert"** to refer to people working in fields that directly provide information about life after high school, research that information and the choices people make, and/or have relevant observations about that information. Included are representatives from research consortiums, schools, college access and success programs, trade associations, community-based organizations, and workforce development organizations.*

*We use the term **"community"** to refer to people living the experience of post-high school decisions. These could be young people currently attending high school, recent high school graduates or attendees (within ~10 years), or family members such as parents, caregivers, and siblings who witnessed and participated in the process.*

In Phase 1, we completed 21 interviews in total:

- 8 Chicago expert interviews
- 6 Houston expert interviews
- 4 Chicago community interviews
- 3 Houston community interviews

The experts represented:

- Community-based organizations
- Trade associations and unions
- Workforce development organizations
- College access and success programs
- Research consortiums
- High schools

Community members included:

- High school and college students
- Parents of young people
- Recent alumni of career training and outreach programs
- First generation college students
- Members of minoritized communities, including immigrants
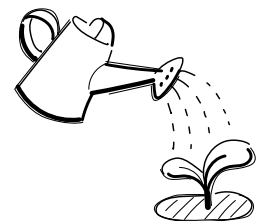
What We Heard

The interviews highlighted four key themes:

- Overall, students are not getting enough information through standard high school resources

- Outside programs that offer career and college information fill those gaps

- What information is available can be hard to parse, and trods familiar paths

- Stratified networks lead to stratified information access

Overall, students are not getting enough information through standard high school resources

Throughout our interviews with young people and experts, we heard the same thing: high schools are not providing robust information to students about their options after graduating. High student-to-counselor ratios leave students with limited individualized guidance, and even when additional support is available, it may be too general to be useful. "All they told me was, college, military, or go into a job.... I was assigned a counselor but it was to cover those three topics and nothing else. No specific information."

Outside programs that offer career and college information fill those gaps

College access and career-oriented community organizations and nonprofits provide additional information, offering students guidance on career exploration, college applications, financial aid, and more. These organizations provide essential training in high-demand fields, as well as soft-skills development, resume writing help, and even trauma-informed counseling. They also connect students with opportunities to experience different workplaces and industries firsthand.

What information is available can be hard to parse, and trods familiar paths

Young people often face a double-edged sword: too much information on the one hand, and not enough specific, current information that fits an individual's circumstances on the other. Much of the information that's readily available lacks crucial context and often sticks to well-worn and sometimes outdated paths. For instance, job advertisements might promise attractive wages without providing details about required qualifications or transportation. And a Houston trade union leader noted that young people may have heard the words "electrician" or "plumber," but are unaware of other building and construction jobs, such as pipe fitter, glazier, or operations engineer.

Stratified networks lead to stratified information access

> *"All they told me was, college, military, or go into a job... I was assigned a counselor but it was to cover those three topics and nothing else. No specific information."*
>
> *— High school student*

Interviews reinforced that access to information is often determined by pre-existing networks and socioeconomic factors. Word-of-mouth referrals from family, neighbors, and friends play a significant role in how young people learn about their options. Additionally, language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the U.S. higher education system and career training options pose significant challenges for immigrant families.

Phase 2 Learnings

Process and Methodology

Phase 2, July-November 2024, built on the initial learnings from Phase 1 through additional interviews with experts and community members.

- 9 additional expert interviews representing the sectors mentioned above, plus public school districts and networking platforms
  - 5 in Chicago
  - 4 in Houston

For a total of 23 expert interviews across Phases 1 + 2

- 178 additional community interviews
  - 78 in Chicago
  - 100 in Houston
  - 8 in rural Texas, near the Coastal Bend area outside of Corpus Christi

For a total of 193 community interviews across Phases 1 + 2

City	Expert Interviews	Community Interviews
Chicago	13	82
Houston	10	103
Rural Texas	0	8
Total	23	193

While we conducted Phase 1 interviews remotely using Open Campus researchers, in Phase 2 we wanted to foreground local voices even more and continue our focus on first-generation college students and communities that often lack access to trusted information.

We constructed a local-first framework made up of "local coordinators" and "local community ambassadors," all of whom lived in the Chicago or Houston metro areas. Ambassadors were the primary interviewers of local residents, with the coordinators serving as Open Campus's main points of contact in each location to recruit ambassadors, answer questions, and facilitate the process in general. Coordinators were paid a stipend for their work, and ambassadors were paid an hourly rate for theirs. In each city, we had one coordinator and several ambassadors who spoke Spanish to ensure we could reach Spanish-speaking communities. We prioritized Spanish for this project given the sizable Spanish-speaking populations in each location.

We met with each of the 18 ambassadors to explain the project, connect them with the coordinators, and learn about their own journey after high school. Building on the tools created by the American Journalism Project for its community listening around information needs, we developed a qualitative interview template. Ambassadors were encouraged to use that as a starting point, but we also gave them background on the goals of the project so they could take the conversations in directions that made the most sense. They reached out to a combination of friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and strangers for the interviews. Ambassadors then filled out either online forms or shared recordings to capture the insights from the interviews.

Themes and Gaps

Our Phase 2 interviews echoed and built upon our themes from Phase 1. We identified 8 major information gaps and themes, and have included representative quotes from our interviews for each:

Gap: Life Skills and Financial Literacy

Many students reported feeling unprepared for life after high school, especially in the realm of "adulting." Young people called out basic life skills as relatively absent from their high school education. Some examples: time management, balancing a job with school, and finding housing. Within the broader category of life skills, personal finance emerged as a key area that young people want more information on, including budgeting, taxes, investing, and building credit. Young people also said they need more accurate information on paying for college, such as how to understand grant opportunities, loan packages, and repayment terms. A recent survey of Chicago community college students found huge gaps in financial aid understanding; more than 70% of respondents didn't know if their loans were subsidized or not, or how much the loans would cost in the end.

The Houston School for the Performing and Visual Arts is trying to fill this gap with a required "capstone" course for seniors. The class, which meets 2-3 times per week, starts with an exploration of how students got to this point, and where they want to go — a focus on telling their personal story, which helps with both college applications and exploring what else might come after high school. Guidance counselors make guest appearances to explain things like application timelines and FAFSA forms. In the spring, the course gets more tactical and practical, with classes that focus on navigating life after their diploma, such as financial aid packages, cooking, changing a tire, and personal finance. That last focus area is critical; the community college survey revealed that most students don't have a budget in place and often forgo basic necessities because they run out of money on a monthly basis.

A few of the experts we spoke with, however, emphasized that students are best primed to learn this kind of practical information when they're ready to use it. They may actually take it in better after high school.

> *"Information about what housing you can get — types of apartments in your price range, something you can afford — maybe some jobs they can offer that are close to a college you want to, or housing like apartment complexes that are close to a college, and also I would say like information about how to handle bills and stuff, how to handle taxes."*
>
> *— High school senior near Corpus Christi, TX*

> *"I feel like after high school I do not have all the information I need to be fully successful. For example, they do not teach you about how to present yourself during interviews, how to support yourself financially, doing taxes, and overall key aspects of moving on to adult life."*
> — *A University of Houston student from the Spring Branch neighborhood*

> *"I still needed information to continue my education. I needed help with trying to find resources to keep me in school such as financial aid. This is mainly the reason why I wasn't able to finish school."*
> — *A stay-at-home mom in the Houston metro area*

Gap: Career Exposure

Interviewees said they're not aware of the different career paths they could pursue; they're limited to traditional choices as depicted in media, or jobs common in their family and friend networks. A finance executive who volunteers as an adviser with a career-networking platform for first-generation and low-income students told us about a first-generation college intern at her firm who was majoring in accounting. After observing the student and her interests, the adviser suggested she look into private wealth management as a career path — the intern said "Sure, but I don't know what that is."

Related to this, some people expressed a desire to start the career exploration process earlier, before junior or senior year of high school, in order to have more time to learn about options. "Many kids still don't know what's available, and not enough is done at younger ages," said the career networking adviser. She added that companies as well should invest earlier in students, to create longer-term relationships and build up networking skills among young people from diverse backgrounds.

Across the board, we also heard a need for deeper information about non-college options. Despite a growing trend to offer more information on vocational training and other career-focused opportunities in addition to post-secondary education, many students reported a lack of information for high schoolers who aren't interested in or planning on continuing their education. One Houston workforce development organization organizes summer programs at Rice University precisely to expose young people to high-growth fields. Close to 80 high school students spend a week learning about careers in healthcare, education, and building and construction. "They touch and feel the tools, they work with patient dummies," said a representative from the organization. "And we didn't choose just straight-A students," he added. "We wanted ones who are really interested in these industries."

In Chicago, the Success Bound program starts in 6th grade and runs through 12th, offering students the opportunity to explore six different pathways (college, employment, military, gap year, job training, and apprenticeships), and how to access and make the most of each. But while high school students are required to choose a pathway in order to graduate, there's no built-in time expressly for exploration work in the mandated schedule. So it often comes down to individual schools, and whether counselors prioritize getting teens involved with the program.

> *"There are so many jobs out there that are never discussed. People are like oh, astronaut — or something more attainable like a teacher. There's a wider range of career options out there."*
>
> *— A 20-something college graduate in the Chicago metro area*

> *"Before you decide on a career, get in the door and get experience first. When I was thinking about being a doctor, I worked part time at a doctor's office. That experience, I would say, more so than discovering [where she ended up]— was the biggest deterrent. It just was not for me."*
>
> *— A 20-something college graduate in the Chicago metro area*

> *"Schools should offer career trips to jobs to give kids an insight of different careers. Instead of having career day and employees come to the school to "talk" about their jobs, take the students to the jobs to actually see it and get a feel for it."*
>
> *— A 23-something college graduate in the Chicago metro area*

> *"I wish I had known that I had many career options after graduating high school. I always thought attending a university was the only way to advance to a great career. Now that I'm in college, I've learned about other routes I could've taken that would've produced the same results."*
>
> *— An assistant daycare teacher from Chicago, now working near Bloomington, Ill.*

> *"It would have been helpful to have more information on how to build a strong portfolio, network with professionals, and find reliable resources for self-learning in tech. Additionally, understanding the long-term career growth from starting in the workforce versus attending college would have been valuable."*
>
> *— A college senior in southeast Houston*

Gap: Mentorship and Networking Beyond Family Circles

Families exert influence over young people, in both positive and negative ways. Some people reported feeling undue pressure to attend college, while others appreciated being supported in that way. First-generation college students may feel a responsibility to stay close to home, limiting their options; at the same time, we also heard from many young people that they themselves prefer to remain where they grew up for college and work. Nationally, about 3 in 4 students attending a four-year college, in fact, stay in their home state. Students from lower-income families also face more limited career networks. Very few interviews mentioned teachers or mentors as influencing their post-high school decisions. For those that did, however, it was clear that non-family mentor figures were extremely helpful in helping to navigate their choices.

Young people we spoke with recognize the importance of relationships.
Yet they feel unsure of how to build them, both socially and professionally. Tapping into professional networks that expose students to different career options can be especially valuable for immigrant and low-wealth families. One networking platform we spoke with caters expressly to first generation and low-income students. "I am a first-gen college graduate myself, and I can see when they look confused, or don't know what to ask," said a manager at the platform. "Part of the thing with first-gen kids is that we don't know a lot of people who are able to open doors for us. So meeting people [through the platform] they wouldn't have otherwise met — that alone is exciting."

> *"I wish I had better guidance on how to build a strong professional network early on and how important it is to gain practical experience through internships or entry-level jobs. More hands-on experiences in high school would've been more helpful."*
>
> *— A software engineer from Chicago*

> *"The information that I wish I had about life after high school was how to build connections. When I entered college, I quickly realized that connections is what matters. Networking and seeking out mentors are skills that aren't taught in high school. In college, I had to navigate it on my own, which I wish I knew about after high school. Another thing that I wish I learned was how to make real friends from different cultures. Here in Houston, I only interact with mostly Asians and Hispanic kids, but in college, the culture is more oriented toward white people. It was harder for me to interact with them because I haven't had the experience talking to white people."*
>
> *— A college student in the Houston metro area*

Gap: Immigration Support

First-generation immigrant families face specific hurdles. Language can often be a barrier, and parents may lack cultural and practical context. A community organization representative who works with Latino immigrants noted that **having information accessible in the primary language of parents and caregivers is a big obstacle to understanding post-high school options.** And for immigrant parents, whether or not they attended college in their native country, simply understanding the higher education system in the U.S. is another. College and career options aren't the same from country to country, and so immigrant parents aren't always equipped to provide well-informed advice to their children. Undocumented status, which may vary within families, adds a level of extreme stress and fear, which can impact post-high school decisions. First-generation college students face similar barriers. Without family models to look to, they can feel unprepared and unsupported on campus. The mother of a recent college graduate from Houston said, "It's even the little stuff. Everybody else knew the size of the bed even for the university, we didn't know. We didn't know that she can have that little fridge over there. It's those little things that look like they are not important, but they are."

> *"One of the major challenges that we face in planning our futures here may be being first generation students in our family. When making major decisions in my life, I always question whether I'm making the right decisions because no one in my immediate family has been really faced with such freedom of choice in the past. It can be a little scary, but having mentors helps a lot."*
>
> *— A college junior from the Spring Valley Village neighborhood of Houston*

Gap: Mental and Physical Health Resource

Young people need information on wellness resources, both mental and physical. The transition into college and career can be challenging, and several people said they'd appreciate **coping strategies and support systems.**

> *"I think a lot of us are dealing with depression but don't want to speak about it because of shame. If we had more information about what's available to us we might have a shot at making it after high school."*
>
> *— A high school senior on the west side of Chicago*

> *"I wish I had known more about my college's retention rate and environment. I lacked a sense of commitment to do well because I didn't feel represented. I wish there was more information about campus involvement and how to cope with feeling isolated and overwhelmed."*
>
> *— A college junior from the Spring Valley Village neighborhood of Houston*

Theme: Prevalence of Online Information — and Skepticism About the Value of College in General

YouTube and TikTok got the most mentions for sources of "real people" sharing information about school and jobs. Instagram and Reddit are also popular. Some students said they prefer to go straight to a primary source for information on choosing a college or a career, however, such as a university website. Some interviews revealed an air of skepticism and even cynicism about college — several interviewees felt they could learn what they needed to online, with no need to spend money on college. Still, the majority of people we spoke to had a bachelor's or associate's degree, were attending college, or were planning to attend college (likely influenced by our local coordinators and most of our ambassadors attending college themselves).

> *"TikTok... show me different aspects of careers, like days in the life of (insert career name) or "get ready with me" videos where people answer questions from followers who ask them about their career. It's nice to see people being transparent about what it's like in the workplace and how it realistically works. These help me look into careers that would interest me and how I can get there. I don't look into specific accounts, but I really trust regular employees filming videos from their own accounts because it feels more authentic."*
>
> *— A high school senior in northwest Houston*

> *"If I'm honest with you, everything is on social media. If I want to learn how to do something I honestly can go on social media to find out. Why waste my time going to college to learn something and take 4 years to learn when I can go online and learn it, straight to the point, and learn it in a couple of hours."*
>
> *— An Amazon delivery driver on the west side of Chicago who dropped out of college after one semester*

Theme: General Sense of Overwhelm and Fear of Making the Wrong Decision

Even as many young people reported wanting *more* information, they also reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information out there, with no great way to navigate it. In the same vein, lots of interviewees said they felt too much pressure to have life figured out at 18. For some, that leads to a sense of paralysis.

> *"It's hard to make your own schedule and your own decisions. I didn't feel prepared for that. Also it's OK if things don't go how you plan them to go after high school. Everyone is going at their own pace."*
>
> *— A high school graduate from the Spring Branch area of Houston, now working in retail part-time*

Many of the experts we interviewed touched on this theme, wondering if the longtime silos of K-12 school districts, colleges, government, and employers could be bridged. More connections across sectors, focused on local-specific information, would benefit everyone, not only young people but educators and employers too. "If the school district is relying on consultants to provide information on jobs," said one workforce development leader, "it's not going to be accurate. **And it's not going to be based on what's happening locally.** If community colleges aren't connected to employers, they may unintentionally be training and teaching to a road to nowhere." She added that it's just as important for government agencies to build bridges and make connections — otherwise residents aren't aware of program and support offerings.

Silos exist within each sector, too. There may be different standards from district to district, or even school to school. "The career folks and the college folks don't always live in the same house," one education researcher said. "And if they do, they're not always talking to each other. When we're thinking about who's taking on the responsibility for preparing students and helping them understand the scope of options that exist to them, it's not always clear."

One Chicago area industry representative bemoaned the disconnect between education and companies. **Teachers and counselors can't help guide students toward what comes after high school if they lack deep exposure to how different careers and companies work.** Since 2012, she has led an education program for her company that teaches local students about what they do, sponsoring programs in schools and field trips to their plant.

Looking Ahead

Our learnings from more than 200 interviews in Chicago and Houston have revealed information gaps and themes that highlight the challenges Americans face in getting quality information on their options after high school. While we live in an age of instant access to information, **trusted, local, and independent information is hard to come by,** especially in marginalized communities. And without trusted, local, and independent information, a level playing field is all but impossible to achieve.

Our next phase will build on our learnings to design possible solutions to these challenges. We plan to convene some of the people involved in phases 1 + 2 for deeper follow-up conversations. We'll hold design-thinking sessions, where residents of Chicago and Houston come up with ideas of their own to fill these information gaps. And we'll build prototypes of the strongest ideas, testing them with potential users in each city.

This report summary was written by Bene Cipolla, the principal researcher on the Life After High School project, and Scott Smallwood, CEO of Open Campus. For further information, please reach out to us at afterschool@opencampusmedia.org