



# Beyond Degrees

**Education to Career Pathways: Students Say Yes, but Are Educators and Parents Willing and Prepared to Help Them Navigate Options?**

## Introduction

In our report [\*Degrees of Risk\*](#), we explored the growing appetite among young people and employers for pathways that diverge from the traditional high school to college to workforce route. The people who are pursuing nondegree pathways are building confidence and increasing their employability, and they are overwhelmingly satisfied with their choices. But they remain outliers—a small raft of young people fighting strong currents in an ocean where most still perceive college as a lifeboat.

It seems we are at a critical juncture. Traditional higher education is facing a reputational crisis, which means that young people will, in greater numbers, look elsewhere for educational opportunities after high school, or not look for them at all. Educators are generally overworked. As much as they might wish to encourage students to consider alternatives to traditional higher education, they are likely struggling to find the time and mental space to explore and promote anything outside the status quo. At the same time, students are generally uncertain about themselves and their futures. Parents are looking for different opportunities for their children that will allow them to connect learning to earning in ways that are meaningful and sustainable. In short, everyone is curious about nondegree options.

Yet without a robust and trusted pipeline of information about the quality and outcomes of a wide array of nondegree routes that educators, parents, and students can access well before their last year of high school, nondegree options—like apprenticeships, micro-credential programs, boot camps, and technical education—will remain obscured by the allure of the traditional college experience. Vast numbers of young people will miss out on life-changing experiences that could set them up to be inspired, confident, assured of their purpose, and highly employable.

# Background



In the companion piece to this paper—[Success, Redefined](#)—we presented data from a survey of young people who have, in fact, opted out of college. Their most commonly selected reasons for not starting or finishing college were cost (31%), uncertainty about post-school plans (27%), a need or desire to enter the workforce (16%), and a need to help support their family (15%). About half of those respondents have pursued or are pursuing nondegree education-to-workforce pathways, including apprenticeships, licensures, technical education, and boot camps. We asked them how they felt about their choice, what (and who) influenced their decision, and their overall satisfaction with their choice. They largely said that they were satisfied and achieving their goals.

Still, we know that young people don't make decisions in isolation. Their parents, teachers, and counselors are, every day and in a variety of ways, influencing the decisions they're making. How much do they know about nondegree options? If the adults in their lives aren't aware of such opportunities, how will young people learn about them? If parents and educators are skeptical about nondegree choices, does that skepticism influence the opinions of the young people in their care? And, critically,

who is ready and willing to encourage their own students or children to take the road less traveled?

To learn more about this important part of the equation, we surveyed the parents, teachers, and counselors of high school students. Their insights—woven into the discussion below—add nuance to our understanding of the public's awareness and perceptions of nondegree pathways and help to contextualize the decision-making process many young people face when it comes time to leave high school. From those insights, we offer a set of recommendations that can help nondegree pathways become part of the mainstream vernacular in schools and normalized as options for people who desire to pursue them.

But first, a refresher:

## What are pathways?

In the context of this paper, “pathways” are characterized as diverse, non-degree-bearing education-to-career options. It’s important to note, however, that some pathways might ultimately lead to or count toward the attainment of a degree. Pathways can stand alone as career-defining experiences or form independent building blocks in a greater education-to-career journey. While what follows is not an exhaustive list, a pathway could include one or more of these programs and experiences:

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



Learn more about the landscape of pathways in our paper

[\*A Universe of Possibilities: Education to Career Pathways for the Future of Work.\*](#)

## From whom did we hear?

This paper examines the thoughts, opinions, and decisions of five key groups. In this paper, they are defined as follows:



### PARENTS

The parents of high school students.



### EDUCATORS

The collective group of high school teachers and counselors we surveyed. Note that in some instances, we distinguish between the two roles for clarity.



### NON-COLLEGE YOUTH

Young people we surveyed who have not pursued, and are not planning to pursue, a college degree.



### NON-PATHWAY YOUTH

Young people we surveyed who have not pursued a college degree or any of the nondegree pathways defined above.



### PATHWAY YOUTH

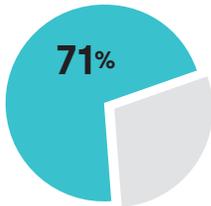
Young people who have not pursued a college degree but have opted to pursue or have already pursued any of the nondegree pathways defined above. It's important to note that while our pathway respondents are not degree holders, a pathway student is not precluded from pursuing a degree at a later point and might already have a degree.

# Nondegree Pathways: A Closer Look

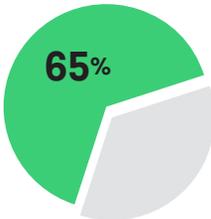
What follows is a discussion of the questions that remain about nondegree pathways, supported by a series of data points that, while not definitive statements, hint at possible answers.

## What do young people who are forgoing college think about their postsecondary options and experiences, and about the choices they have made for themselves?

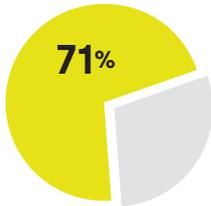
### The Data



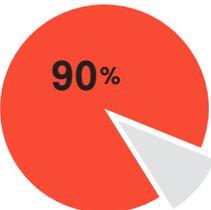
71% of young people who had chosen to pursue a nondegree pathway reported having high confidence in their postsecondary plans, compared with 57% of non-pathway respondents.



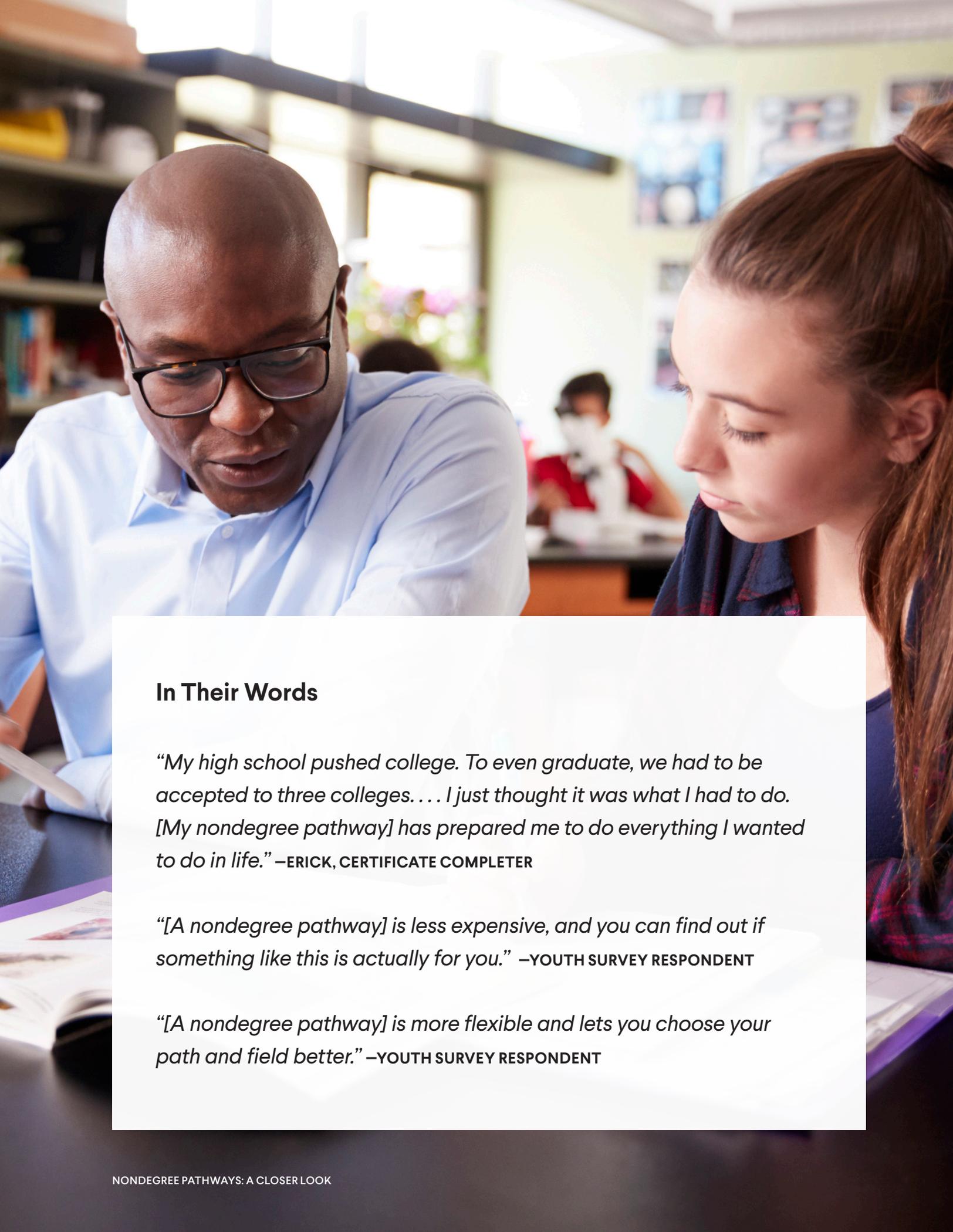
65% of young people who had chosen to pursue a nondegree pathway reported working part or full time, compared with 51% of non-pathway youth.



71% of young people who had chosen to pursue a nondegree pathway said they feel prepared for the workforce, compared with 64% of non-pathway youth.



The vast majority of young people who had chosen to pursue a nondegree pathway (90%) said they are satisfied with their choice. The top reasons selected include the opportunity to participate in hands-on learning (44%) and the ability to complete such programs faster than they could earn a college degree (41%).



## **In Their Words**

*“My high school pushed college. To even graduate, we had to be accepted to three colleges. . . . I just thought it was what I had to do. [My nondegree pathway] has prepared me to do everything I wanted to do in life.”* –ERICK, CERTIFICATE COMPLETER

*“[A nondegree pathway] is less expensive, and you can find out if something like this is actually for you.”* –YOUTH SURVEY RESPONDENT

*“[A nondegree pathway] is more flexible and lets you choose your path and field better.”* –YOUTH SURVEY RESPONDENT

## The Discussion

Regardless of any change in public opinion about nondegree pathways and early evidence of nondegree pathways offering numerous advantages, young people who take a pass on the status quo and opt to pursue them are still in the minority. Therefore, they often must overcome significant pressure—whether from family, peers, educators, or themselves—to normalize their decision. Every young person who “opts in” to a nondegree pathway still must, in a sense, “opt out” of the traditional college pathway. Following a path perceived as different is not always a comfortable scenario for teenagers.

Perceptions aside, the data points above paint an encouraging picture of what it’s actually like for those who do go on to pursue a nondegree pathway. Apprenticeship, for example, offers young people the ability to earn while they learn and thus start their careers with little to no debt and with industry-recognized credentials after a year or less of training. Similarly, licensure is tightly aligned to the needs and

requisites of employers, meaning that sector-specific employment is well within reach, if not guaranteed, for those who pursue that option. Boot camps might not open the door to a job immediately, but if stacked as part of a competency-based pathway, they can signal to employers that someone has the specific skills needed for a role.

That speed and hands-on learning opportunities are commonly selected as the top benefits of nondegree pathways speaks volumes. Today’s young people need and want to be able to join the workforce quickly because the economic realities they face tend to be different from those of the generations for whom the traditional college experience was designed. They want more than just a printed statement about their knowledge; instead, they want verifiable guarantees of their employability and ability to bring value to a job. And all signs point to the ability of nondegree pathways to give them just that.

**How much do parents know about nondegree pathways, how do they feel about them, and how likely are they to encourage their children to pursue such pathways over college?**

## The Data

Over half (51%) of parents said they had heard some or a lot about nondegree pathways. (Forty-three percent had heard either not much or nothing at all, and 6% weren't sure or had no opinion"). Of those who had heard about nondegree pathways, the primary information sources they selected were teachers (42%), family members (38%), and friends (36%).

Those parents with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to be aware of nondegree pathways than those without degrees (66% versus 44%, respectively).

When asked how disappointed or delighted they would feel if their child did not pursue a two- or four-year college experience after high school, only 28% of parents indicated that they would be disappointed. Thirty percent said they would be delighted, and 41% were neutral on the matter.

Eighty-eight percent of parents expressed some level of interest in learning more about nondegree pathways for their children. Those with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to report being very interested in learning about pathways than those without a degree (33% versus 24%, respectively). Black and

Hispanic parents were more likely to say they were very interested in learning more about nondegree pathways than white parents were (34%, 26%, and 21%, respectively).

When asked to select what they perceived as the top advantages/benefits of completing nondegree pathways, parents chose perceived attributes like lower cost (45%), the ability to complete them more quickly than a degree program (41%), the ability to earn a good salary afterward (34%), and the relative ease of finding a job afterward (32%).

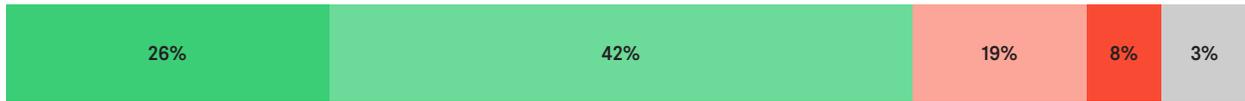
**Eighty-seven percent of parents said they think their children will have some level of interest in learning more about nondegree pathways.**

**Two in five parents said that they want schools to start advising students about their postsecondary options in middle school.**

Only 26% of parents said they think their children are very prepared for their post-high school education and career transition.

When asked to select their most trusted sources of support and guidance for their child regarding postsecondary options, teachers and counselors were the most-selected groups (chosen by 68% and 64%, respectively).

To the best of your knowledge, how prepared are your child(ren) for their post-high school education and career transition?



● Very prepared   ● Somewhat prepared   ● Not too prepared   ● Not at all prepared   ● Don't Know/No Opinion

## In Their Words

*"[A nondegree pathway] is a great way to earn a great living without starting out in a pile of debt."* –PARENT SURVEY RESPONDENT

*"College is expensive, and I don't feel like kids should go into debt before they have even started their lives."* –PARENT SURVEY RESPONDENT

*"I would like to know all the options available for my child after high school."* –PARENT SURVEY RESPONDENT

## The Discussion

The importance of parental influence on young people's decision-making and perceptions of postsecondary options cannot be overstated. The fact that parents were nearly equally split on whether they would feel disappointed or delighted if their child opted not to pursue college, and the majority said they felt neutral about it, makes this a tricky data set from which to glean definitive insights.

However, one can't help but wonder: Would 30% of parents have felt delighted by a no-college decision a decade ago? Would just 28% have felt disappointed? Or does this speak to a shift in public opinion about the costs versus the benefits of traditional college?

When presented with the idea that there are other high-quality options available to their children, nearly all parents expressed interest. Many parents, like their children, are interested in the possibility of a no- or low-cost pathway that is more directly connected to the workforce. A third of degree-holding

parents expressed high interest in learning more about nondegree pathways for their children, which surfaces questions about their own postsecondary experiences and how those might be influencing the desires they hold for their children's futures.

Regardless of their reasons, many parents—just like their children—want and deserve to know more about nondegree options so they can see a complete picture of what education and employment could look like after high school. Many parents wish their children had access to more information, and earlier in their educational journeys, to aid their decision-making process.

Parents seem to place great trust in teachers and counselors to offer insights and guidance to their children about what to do next. But are educators equipped and prepared to offer guidance about all the available options?

**How much do educators know about nondegree pathways, and how do they feel about students learning more about—and pursuing—them?**

## The Data

Nearly 4 in 5 educators (79%) had heard about nondegree pathways. Over half (51%) had heard some information, 28% had heard a lot, 17% hadn't heard much, and 4% had heard nothing at all or indicated that they didn't know. Counselors reported knowing a lot about nondegree pathways to a greater extent than teachers did (36% versus 26%, respectively).

Eighty-six percent of educators said they would approve of their students choosing to pursue a nondegree education pathway over a college or university. Six percent said they would disapprove, and 8% had no opinion.

**The top hesitations educators had about nondegree pathways were “I think employers favor job applicants with college degrees” (35%) and “I do not know how to judge the quality of nondegree pathways” (33%).**

Educators see counselors as the primary source of information about nondegree pathways. Over

a third (36%) of all educators cited counselors as the most important source, while 14% cited teachers.

Nearly half of educators said they think the information and guidance about nondegree pathways that their high school provides to students are not enough. The other half said they feel it is adequate.

Nearly all educators expressed an interest in learning more about nondegree pathways for students. (Forty-five percent said they are very interested, 39% are somewhat interested, and 12% are a little interested.) More counselors than teachers said they are very interested in learning more (52% versus 43%, respectively).

Nearly all educators (97%) thought their students would be interested in learning more about nondegree pathways

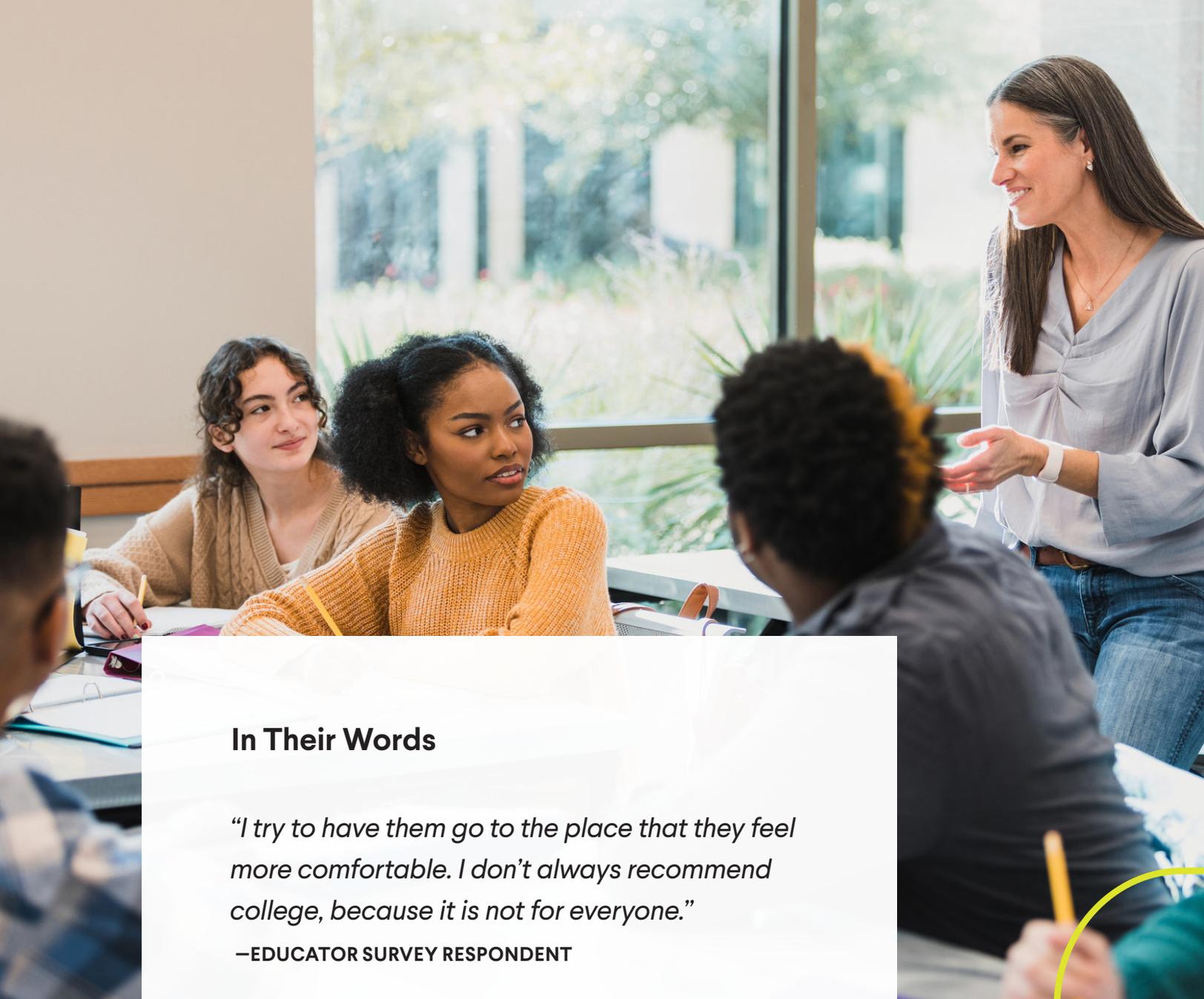
Eighty-three percent of educators said they think that if staff members at their school learned more about nondegree pathways, they would be very or somewhat open to encouraging students to look into and pursue them.

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Almost all teachers/counselors express interest in learning more about non-degree pathways for their students; nearly half (45%) are very interested.

### How interested are you in learning more about non-degree postsecondary education pathways for your students?





## In Their Words

*“I try to have them go to the place that they feel more comfortable. I don’t always recommend college, because it is not for everyone.”*

—EDUCATOR SURVEY RESPONDENT

*“Many students are unprepared for college. They cannot afford it, but they have the skills to do other things.”* —EDUCATOR SURVEY RESPONDENT

*“[What kids do next] is an individual decision. Providing opportunities for them to realize their skills and interests will help them better decide.”*

—EDUCATOR SURVEY RESPONDENT

## The Discussion

Educators have traditionally functioned as information gatekeepers when it comes to postsecondary choices. The choices they have offered have typically been limited to “College or no college?” and “To which colleges do you want to apply?” This is in no small part because college readiness is often used as a measure of school and educator success.

Encouragingly, most educators today have heard about nondegree options, and a substantial number—indicated that they know quite a lot about them. Their overwhelming—albeit hypothetical—approval of students choosing nondegree pathways over college indicates their general feelings on the matter. But approving of someone else making a decision is not the same as being prepared to help that person make the decision.

Although there is a growing body of research that has shown the value of nondegree pathways, a good deal of educators still hold the strong conviction that employers only want to see job candidates who have a degree. That belief suggests that schools run the risk of being stuck in a time warp in terms of their disconnectedness from the working world. Counselors indicated that they continue to push degree programs because they think it’s what employers want, even though only 15% said that they are actually using employers as a source of information. And our earlier study, *Degrees of Risk*, found that 72% of employers actually feel that a degree is not, in fact, a good indicator of the quality of a jobseeker.

## EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVES

General Motors, Delta Air Lines, IBM, Kellogg’s, and Bank of America have dropped degree requirements for many roles and are moving instead towards skills-based hiring, as have state governments of Utah, Virginia, Maryland, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania.

This move makes quality jobs more accessible to the approximately 60% of Americans who don’t have a college degree, and helps to close a job access gap that has long hurt People of Color and populations that have faced systemic barriers in access to education and career opportunities. (Quartz has reported that “requiring a degree eliminates 76% of Black workers, 83% of Latinx workers, 81% of rural workers, and almost 70% of veterans from talent pools.”)



When it comes to hiring trends, what, exactly, is happening in the working world? What do employers want? It's true that, whether or not employers see the value in it, the college degree remains the default signal that many of them look for in the hiring process as evidence of a candidate's readiness. Some employers might be carefully waiting and watching the actions of others in their sector before making a shift away from degree-based hiring. But a growing list of well-known companies—General Motors, Delta Air Lines, IBM, Kellogg's, and Bank of America among them—have dropped degree requirements for many roles and are moving instead toward skills-based hiring, as have the state governments of Utah, Virginia, Maryland, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania, to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

This move makes quality jobs more accessible to the approximately 60% of Americans who don't have a college degree, and it can help to close a job access gap that has long hurt people of color and populations that have faced systemic barriers in access to education and career opportunities. (Business news website Quartz has reported that “requiring a degree

eliminates 76% of Black workers, 83% of Latinx workers, 81% of rural workers, and almost 70% of veterans from talent pools.”<sup>2</sup>)

Given that educators are basing their postsecondary advice on their preconceived notions about what employers might want, are teachers being helped and encouraged to understand what's really happening in the workforce? Save for those in schools with robust career exploration and readiness programs, it seems many are not.

Educators expressed high optimism that their schools would be open to encouraging students to pursue nondegree pathways if they had more information about such options. From that we can infer that many educators might be looking to their schools to help normalize nondegree options and put a framework in place to benefit teachers and students alike.

**If information about nondegree pathways is not reaching young people, why not, and what can be done differently?**

## The Data

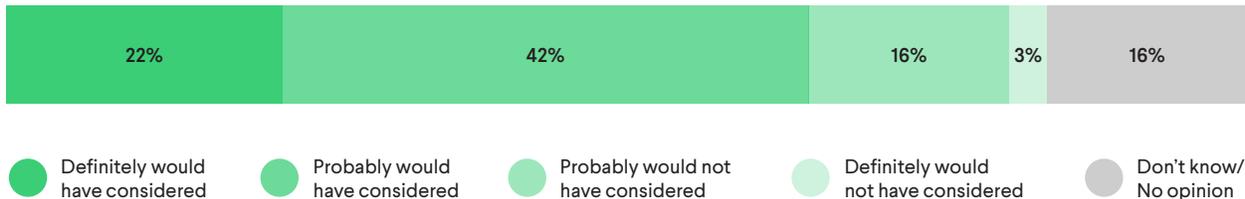
Two in 3 non-pathway youth (64%) said they would have considered pathway programs if they had known about them.

When non-pathway youth were asked about their familiarity with different pathways, 29% indicated that they were unfamiliar or not very familiar with industry or trade certification. Thirty percent were unfamiliar with licensure, 32% were unfamiliar with certificate programs, 36% were unfamiliar with apprenticeship, and nearly half (46%) were unfamiliar with boot camps.

When non-college youth were asked to select the top influencers who helped them explore postsecondary options, 66% chose their parents, 52% chose friends, 41% chose teachers, 34% chose relatives, and 24% chose counselors.

**2 in 3 (64%) of non-pathway youth say they would have considered pathway programs if they knew more about them.**

**If you know more about non-degree, postsecondary education pathways in high school, do you think you would have considered them a more practical option for you?**



● Definitely would have considered   ● Probably would have considered   ● Probably would not have considered   ● Definitely would not have considered   ● Don't know/No opinion

## In Their Words

*“Talk to people who have done [a nondegree pathway] 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.”* –YSSA, BOOT CAMP COMPLETER

## The Discussion

Non-college youth said the top barriers that stood in the way of them considering or pursuing a nondegree pathway was a lack of encouragement by their school to explore such options. It's unclear whether students aren't turning to educators for information about nondegree pathways or whether they are doing so and just aren't receiving the information they want or need. In either case, only a quarter of non-college youth said that their school counselor is a top influencer in terms of helping them explore their postsecondary options. Interestingly, parents reported trusting educators more than any other group or role when it comes to helping their children navigate the future.

Where is the disconnect, and why aren't young people getting information about nondegree options in school at the same rate they are getting information about college? This might come down to a simple reality: Educators aren't being supported or don't feel confident enough to promote nondegree options, or the information to which they have access doesn't seem reliable.

Whether it's educators, students, or parents, just knowing something about an option doesn't translate to being certain about its quality or being ready to pursue or promote it. A lack of widely available data on the outcomes of nondegree credentials and pathways is an obstacle to public awareness of these options.

Beyond that, it's no secret that high school counselors are dramatically overworked and therefore might be hard-pressed to take on anything perceived as "extra" or outside their day-to-day responsibilities.



# The Road Ahead

The good news: All of the groups we have surveyed in the past few years—students, parents, and educators—have indicated that they are curious and generally positive about the possibilities that nondegree pathways offer.

The research outlined above indicates a gradual shift. Young people, educators, and parents alike are becoming interested in non-college pathways. High school students, if not yet ready to pursue such opportunities, are at the very least saying, “I wonder. . . .”

But they should not be left to just wonder. The integration of these pathways into the vernacular of the middle and high school experience is a necessity that holds the promise to build a more equitable education-to-workforce paradigm. To facilitate and expedite that change, we broadly recommend the following actions:

1. Continue to research the quality, efficacy, and value of a wide variety of education-to-career opportunities, including apprenticeships, micro-credentials, boot camps, career and technical education (CTE), and certifications.
2. Change the narrative around how such options are presented to young people, their parents, and the workforce, in order to mitigate the stigma around non-college decisions.
3. Change when such options are presented to young people and their parents, with a bias toward starting earlier—in middle school—to ensure that young people have the time and the experiential learning opportunities needed to explore a wide array of options.
4. Create and disseminate high-quality resources to help students, families, and educators navigate the options, as well as developing and sharing change-management resources for employers, to bring clarity to the benefits of hiring people who hold nondegree credentials.
5. Commit to equity and to recognizing that offering multiple pathways into the workforce can open doors for young people for whom doors might have seemed closed because of a “college for all” mindset.
6. Commit to measuring the [quality of credentials](#), with a focus on outcomes, return on investment, and career utility.

7. Shift policy and funding allocations, with a focus on investments in workforce development initiatives that support the economic and skill needs of workers. For example, increase investments in CTE and in support of high-quality, short-term, stackable credentials through Perkins Act funding, and extend Pell Grants to those earning short-term credentials. Policymakers are encouraged to read [\*recommendations\*](#) on how to invest in nondegree pathways.
8. Promote partnerships between employers and educators to ensure that education-to-career pathways are aligned to workforce needs and that employers validate those pathways by hiring from them.
9. Employers looking for ways to integrate skills-based hiring practices into their talent development strategy are encouraged to read and learn about [\*Skills-Based Practices: Journey Map for Employers\*](#).
10. Parents, educators, policymakers, and students hoping to learn more about or pursue nondegree pathways are also encouraged to read the [\*Degrees of Risk\*](#) report.



To learn more or to read about any of these recommendations in more depth, visit: <https://expandopportunities.org>.



# Endnotes

- 1 Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, “Companies Can Drop Degree Requirements, but They Still Don’t Know How To Hire Without Them,” Quartz, August 16, 2023, <https://qz.com/companies-can-drop-degree-requirements-but-they-still-1850741892>.
- 2 McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, “Companies Can Drop Degree Requirements,” <https://qz.com/companies-can-drop-degree-requirements-but-they-still-1850741892>.
3. “Success, Redefined: How Nondegree Pathways Empower Youth to Chart Their Own Course to Confidence, Employability, and Financial Freedom.” Expand Opportunities. October 16, 2023. <https://expandopportunities.org/knowledge-hub/success-redefined/>.

