

Occupational Identity Formation Among Black and Hispanic Youth and Youth from Households with Lower Incomes

Insights and Implications

June 2020



equitable
futures

A PROJECT OF THE
BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

Navigation

This deck provides an introduction to the youth occupational identity research conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research in 2018 and 2019.

The deck includes a summary of key research insights, emergent analytical frameworks, and potential implications of the research findings for the field.

The table of contents on the next slide will help you to navigate the deck so that you can find the information you are most interested in reviewing.

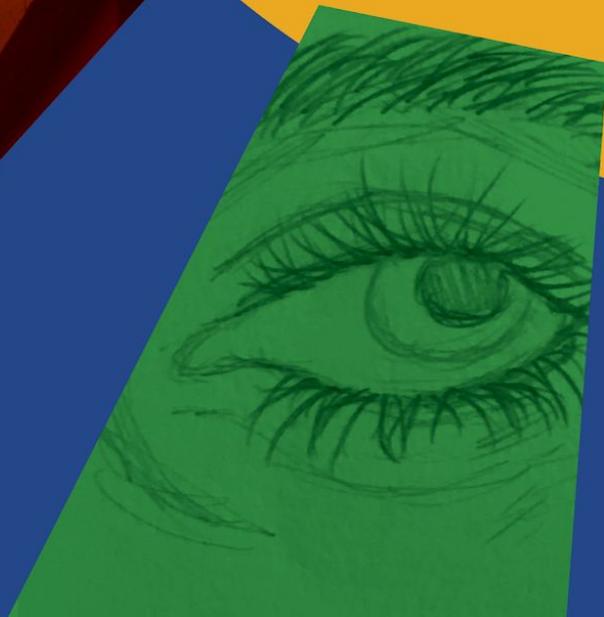


Credit: Annabelle Armstrong – Temple

Table of Contents

Context.....	Slides 4-6
Research Overview	Slides 7-13
Key Insights	Slides 14-43
Implications.....	Slides 44-54
Partners & Resources.....	Slides 55-59

Context



Context

An emerging area of research focuses on how young people form an **occupational identity**—meaning how young people envision their future selves in the workforce, what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong.

Such research is important for building interventions, models, tools, and other public assets that will **increase the range of career exposures young people experience and also the diversity, breadth, and depth of young people's opportunities for career exploration and discovery.**



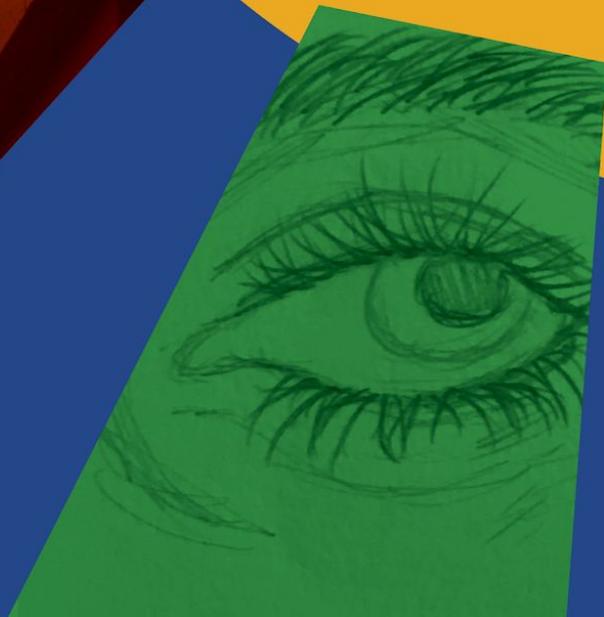
Credit: Ava Victoriano

Opportunity

When it comes to designing interventions that support career pathways, **young people's own ideas, experiences, perspectives, and unique intelligences are often undervalued or ignored**—even more so when the voices belong to Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes.

What if letting young people's experiences and perspectives drive the conversation added an important and missing dimension to efforts to improve career pathways for young people?

Research Overview



Goal

- Explore how young people's identities, values, beliefs, lived experiences, and emotions support or interfere with their educational and work goals and success—and the challenges they face in achieving those goals.
- Learn more about Black and Hispanic young people of any income, and white young people from households with lower incomes.*



Credit: Annabelle Armstrong – Temple

Thank You

At the core of this research are the nearly 4,000 youth who generously shared their lives, experiences, hopes, and challenges with the research team through their participation in focus groups and a national survey. We are deeply grateful for the genuine and heartfelt way these youth engaged in the research.

Partners

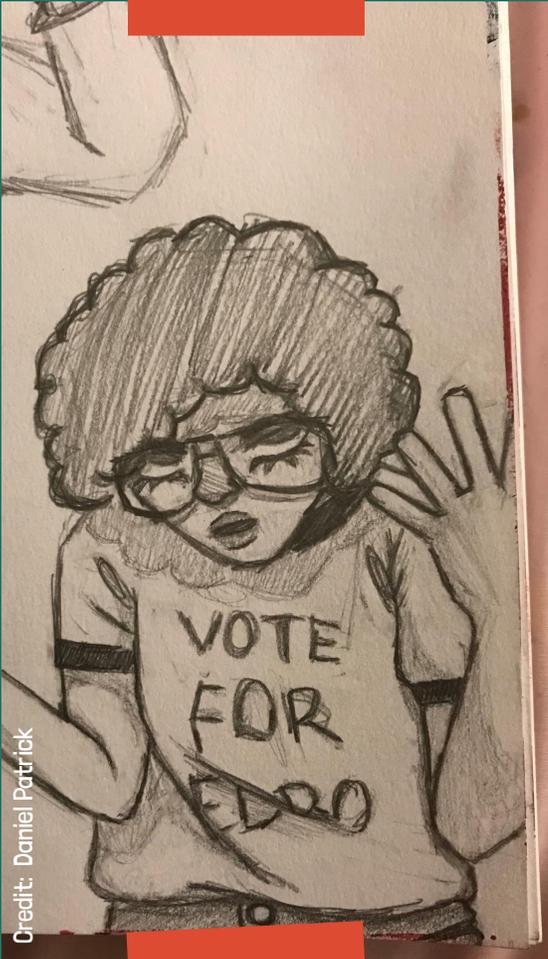
In partnership with [Equitable Futures](#), a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, [Goodwin Simon Strategic Research](#) (GSSR) engaged in this 16-month research project to conduct deep listening research on the impact of young people's own mindsets on the formation of their occupational identity, work, and life goals. The research was informed and supported by an [Advisory Team](#) of 12 advocates, educators, social scientists, program designers, and subject matter experts. This dynamic group served as authentic thought partners, problem solvers, and contributors to the project and provided rich insights that helped to refine the research approach and inquiry.

[Wonder: Strategies for Good](#) is leading work to disseminate and translate the research findings and to build a field of practice around these learnings. The Wonder team is supported by the [Equitable Futures' Advisory Team for Research Activation](#).

Design

The 16-month research project led by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research focused on:

- Developing an in-depth psychological and emotional understanding of young people, parents, and other adult influencers and
- Conducting deep listening research on the impact of young people's own mindsets on the formation of their occupational identity, work, and life goals.



Credit: Daniel Patrick

Participants and Methodology

Nearly **4,000 young people** shared their lives, experiences, hopes, and challenges.

- **Individual In-Depth Interviews:** 7 in-depth interviews were conducted with young people ages 15 to 20 in Gary, IN and Albuquerque, NM
- **In-person Focus Groups:** 57 in-person focus groups were conducted across the country with:
 1. **Youth:** Black, Hispanic, and white youth ages 15 to 21
 2. **Young adults:** Black, Hispanic, and white young adults ages 26 to 29
 3. **Parents/Guardians:** Black, Hispanic, and white parents/guardians of youth ages 15 to 21
 4. **Adult influencers:** Black, Hispanic, and white adults who work and/or volunteer with youth ages 15 to 21

Participants and Methodology

Online Focus Groups

- 2 multi-day online focus groups in English and Spanish
 - Participants from lower income households ages 15 to 21
 - Participants ages 26 to 29 who grew up in lower income households but now identify themselves as middle- or higher-income

Online National Survey

- Among 3,545 young people ages 15 to 21

Key Insights



Introduction

In focus groups and a national survey young people shared their emotional connections and relationships to education and career, including the different pathways they envision taking to reach their life goals.

Analysis revealed eight key research insights that shed light on how young people think about and experience education and career pathways. These insights suggest potential opportunities for the field.



Credit: Ava Victoriano

Key Insights



1. Young people see themselves as their own best change agents



2. Young people experience work as surviving, striving, and thriving



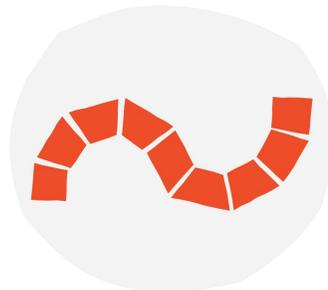
3. Young people experience identity as an asset



4. Young people aspire to live a good life



5. Young people try on their futures



6. Young people envision pathways to thriving



7. Young people are empowered by connections



8. Young people see opportunity in conversation

1. Young People See Themselves as Their Own Best Change Agents



TAKEAWAY

Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes see themselves as the most important change agents in their own lives.

Young people are optimistic, capable, and resourceful and they value career exploration, while parents expect a linear pathway.

1. Young People See Themselves as Their Own Best Change Agents

*“I don't like the pressure. I think that is why I didn't go to college right after graduating because I had no idea what I wanted to do, and I didn't like being pressured by the school system and my parents and everyone that as soon as I graduated I have to know what I want to do the rest of my life. I have to know what school I'm going to go to. I have to have all of that planned out right when I graduate and I was like no, too much pressure. **I'd rather just let some time go, figure out what I want to do, and then go into it wholeheartedly** without having it shoved down my throat, ‘this is what you have to do.’”*

-PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17-21, LOWER INCOME

1. Young People See Themselves as Their Own Best Change Agents



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Leverage young people's feelings of personal agency to shape interventions aimed at helping them achieve their career and life goals.

Opportunity: Support adults in young people's lives to understand the value of youth career exploration; use a combination of stories, data, and opportunities for reflection to show adults the long-term benefit of career exploration early in life.

2. Young People Experience Work as Surviving, Striving, and Thriving



TAKEAWAY

Young people understand that a mix of personal and work experiences characterize their pathways from *surviving* to *striving* to *thriving* in order to achieve their idea of a good life.

Analysis revealed an emergent framework for understanding how young people think about and experience education and work; the emotional connections young people associate with different phases of their education and work pathways; and how young people think about desirable life outcomes and the occupational pathways to get there.

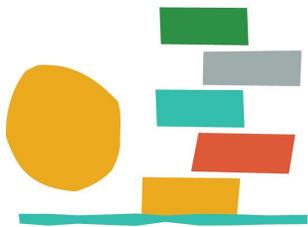
2. Young People Experience Work as Surviving, Striving, and Thriving

FRAMEWORK

Surviving, Striving, and Thriving

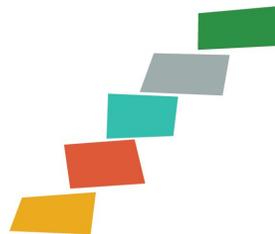
Young people understand work pathways as a continuum of emotional and aspirational states which flow into one another as they learn personally or indirectly about occupational options, make occupational choices, and experience progress and setbacks in their occupational journeys.

SURVIVING



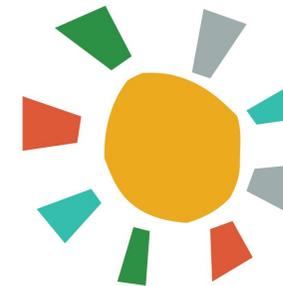
They are living paycheck to paycheck—or have no job—and they feel that they are struggling to make ends meet.

STRIVING



They feel that they have goals and are following steps that will help them advance toward *thriving*.

THRIVING



They feel that they have achieved their goals and attained their personal version of a good life.

2. Young People Experience Work as Surviving, Striving, and Thriving



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Develop interventions that recognize and reflect a more holistic understanding of young people's aspirations and better match how youth think about their futures and how they determine the best pathways to reach their goals.

Opportunity: Design tools and measures that support young people to move from *surviving* to *striving* as well as from *striving* to *thriving*.

3. Young People Experience Identity as an Asset



TAKEAWAY

Black and Hispanic young people believe their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities will be assets as they pursue a good life.

While many young people describe themselves in mostly positive terms, some struggle to connect these positive impressions to the notion of strengths.

3. Young People Experience Identity as an Asset

*“Yes, **my gender is especially important to me** because I take a lot of time perfecting my girly look every single day. It's what **drives me and gives me my confidence**. Also the ability to stay strong as a woman figure today and just being happy with what I was born with. **Culture is definitely important to me** when it comes to food because that's all I mainly consume is Spanish food especially on my days off. Religion is important to me and I choose to believe in my own way. **Race is important** as well because **that's where my ancestors are from** and what we have to remember today about our common past.”*

-26-29, ONLINE, HISPANIC FEMALE, MIXED INCOME

3. Young People Experience Identity as an Asset

“I like that people from my race, gender, and background are unapologetic about being themselves, and are becoming more socially aware of the issues in the country.”

- Online, Black female, 15–21, lower income

“I'm female, Catholic and I also feel I am more of a Mexican-American. American [because] I was born and raised here... **Mexican, [because] I love the culture. I love the food, the hospitality and everything that comes with being Mexican.**”

- Belle Glade, FL, Hispanic female, 17–21, lower income

3. Young People Experience Identity as an Asset



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Develop tools and communication materials that shine a spotlight on Black and Hispanic young people and the strength and pride they derive from their racial and ethnic identities.

Opportunity: Support young people to build a bridge between the positive ways that many see themselves and the skills and capabilities needed to succeed.

4. Young People Aspire to Live a Good Life



TAKEAWAY

Young people say they aspire to live a good life and that a good job is a means to that end. Young people are not asking themselves, “What do I want to be?” Instead they are asking, “How do I want to live?”

Young people have more negative associations with the word *job* and more positive associations with the word *career*.

4. Young People Aspire to Live a Good Life

“I look at my career as more so a means to an end, because I'm very big on life.

I want to live life, not just, oh, I got to get that promotion, you know. Of course, I'm going to get that promotion, just because that's just who I am. But it's not, that's not my absolute goal in life. So, I just think it's just kind of necessary.”

-BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17-20, HIGHER INCOME

4. Young People Aspire to Live a Good Life



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Shift messaging targeted at young people to reflect their understanding that a good life is the desired goal, and a good job or career is one critical element of reaching that goal.

Opportunity: Understand the implications of word choice — job, work, and career — and choose words that intentionally reinforce program or policy objectives and consider how they will be interpreted by young people.

5. Young People Try On Their Futures



TAKEAWAY

Young people yearn to be exposed to and explore a broad range of career and job possibilities. But young people from households with lower incomes may feel greater pressure from their parents, guardians, and family to make the right decision about their education and careers, and this pressure can get in the way of their ability to fully explore a broad range of career options.

Analysis revealed an emergent framework for understanding how young people experience and form their occupational identities.

5. Young People Try On Their Futures

FRAMEWORK

Stages of Occupational Identity Formation

Young people...

- Develop and refine a cohesive occupational identity in three stages: Exposure, Exploration, and Selection
- Demonstrate increasing levels of agency as they move into and out of each stage
- Experience the stages as iterative and compounding



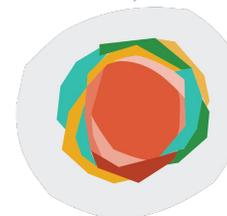
EXPOSURE

Who they know, what they see, and what/who they have access to



EXPLORATION

Trying on different aspects of career and work



SELECTION

Determining the first steps of a chosen career pathway

5. Young People Try On Their Futures

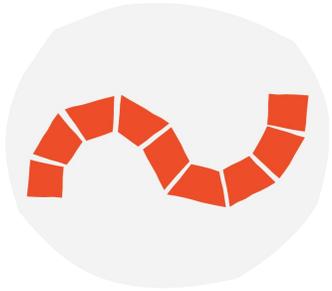


POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Expand opportunities for deep career exploration and experimentation in low-risk settings.

Opportunity: Tell stories that show the ongoing and iterative process of refining career goals — a process that involves exploring and selecting different pathways.

6. Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving



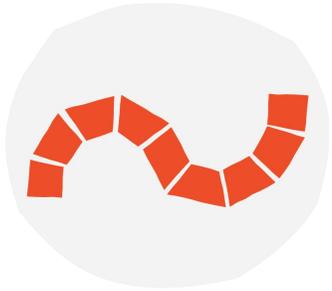
TAKEAWAY

Most young people are optimistic about their futures but have mixed levels of confidence that they can set and achieve their work and life goals.

Analysis revealed five Occupational Pathway categories — distinct ways that youth set occupational goals and create pathways to reach them.

Many young people believe the biggest challenge to their success will be themselves.

6. Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving



FRAMEWORK

Occupational Pathways: 5 Categories

1. Know what they want to do and know how to get there
2. Not sure what they want to do, yet have a good idea of the steps to take to explore in order to get there
3. Know what they want to do, but are unsure how to get there
4. Not sure what they want to do and unsure of what steps to take
5. Know what they want to do, think they know how to get there, but their imagined pathway is inaccurate and/or unrealistic

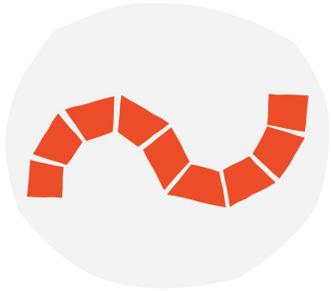
Note: In the focus groups, participants completed a pathway exercise in which they drew their imagined career pathways.

6. Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving

“At 45, I can see myself living in Alabama for sure now, working in a healthcare facility, having maybe one or two kids, a dog, a husband. I see myself...being a good parent, nice vehicle, good credit.”

-GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15-18, LOWER INCOME

6. Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving

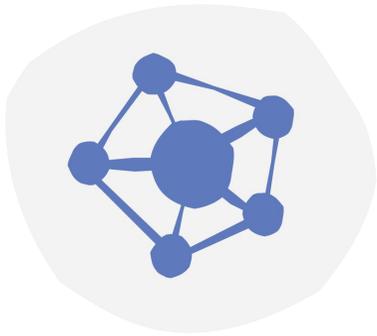


POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Leverage and build on the power and momentum of young people's optimism rather than try to correct it. Support young people to develop the pragmatism they need to achieve their optimistic goals.

Opportunity: Explore ways to use the Five Occupational Pathways to assess young people's preparedness to reach their goals.

7. Young People are Empowered by Connections



TAKEAWAY

Young people know they need support, but they don't always know where to find that support.

Young people value mutuality and transparency with adults, value authentic connections, and feel empowered by quality interactions.

Young people are proud of their ability to find information and resources on their own and in their own communities.

7. Young People are Empowered by Connections

*“Without other people, when you are just depending on yourself..you are trying to be completely self-sufficient and blocking others out, you are just surviving. **If you reach out and have this diverse support system for everything you need, you can have all your needs met, and you can be really thriving and be able to reach all of your goals** rather than just surviving and trying to isolate yourself.”*

-LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE 16-18, LOWER INCOME

7. Young People are Empowered by Connections



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Understand how and when young people move from thinking, “I know I need connections to thrive” to “I know I need connections to thrive AND I know how to get or build those connections.”

Opportunity: Develop tools that balance young people’s need to pursue goals independently while also working to develop relationships with adults and peers who can broker information and support.

Opportunity: Design programs and tools that enable young people to see themselves as valuable contributors to an asset-rich community to which they already belong.

8. Young People See Opportunity in Conversation



TAKEAWAY

Young people experienced focus group conversations as a rare and valued opportunity to discuss their future aspirations and goals with peers and near-peers in a space free of adult judgement.

8. Young People See Opportunity in Conversation

*“Everything about this conversation stood out to me. **I’ve never sat down in a group and actually done this.**”*

-BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17-21, LOWER INCOME

*“It actually has you think and plan out what your possible dreams are and then share that with others and see what other ideas are that may be similar, but totally different. So, then **you get a feel of what other opportunities are out there that maybe you hadn't thought of.**”*

-YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17-21, LOWER INCOME

8. Young People See Opportunity in Conversation



POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Opportunity: Adapt and experiment with conversational spaces where young people feel they can express themselves without judgment and learn from — and be inspired by — their peers and near-peers.

Key Insights



1. Young people see themselves as their own best change agents



2. Young people experience work as surviving, striving, and thriving



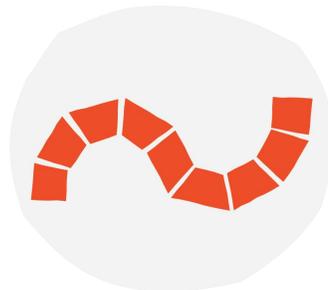
3. Young people experience identity as an asset



4. Young people aspire to live a good life



5. Young people try on their futures



6. Young people envision pathways to thriving

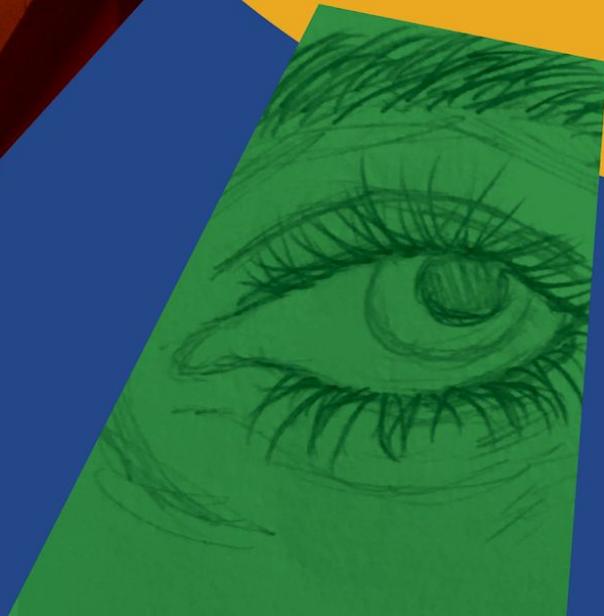


7. Young people are empowered by connections



8. Young people see opportunity in conversation

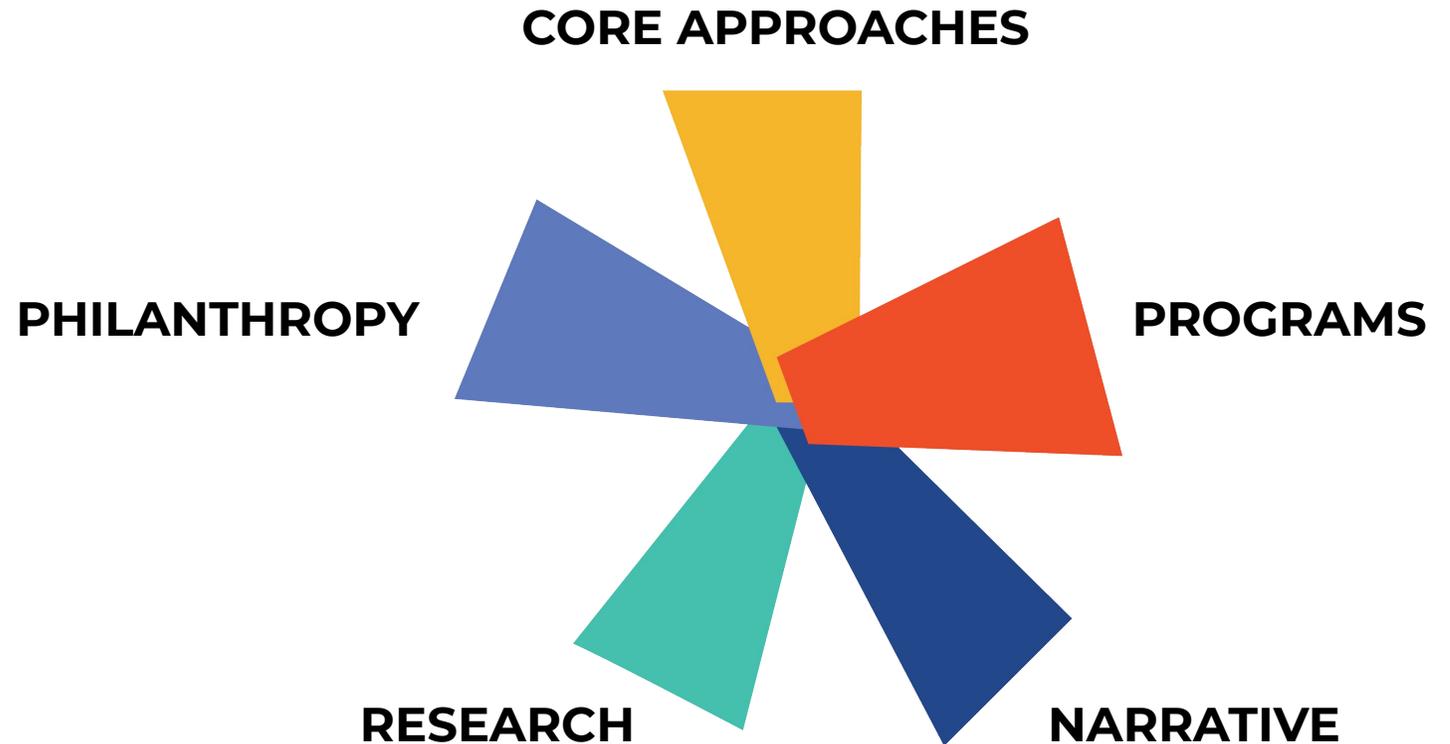
Implications



Implications: Five Levers of Change

The research findings suggest real-world opportunities for the field to influence young people's experience and navigation of career pathways. Conceptually, these opportunities are organized around five levers of change. Stakeholders can activate opportunities within each lever to more intentionally and authentically center youth voices.

This body of research provides an evidence base from which to do so.



Core Approaches



Every sector has an opportunity to evolve their practice to consider core approaches that align with how young people see themselves and think about their futures. This may include:

- Creating youth-centered approaches to designing, developing, continuously improving, and evaluating programs that meet the emotional needs and aspirations of young people.
- Fostering and experimenting with conversational structures where young people feel they can express themselves without judgment and where they can learn from — and be inspired by—their peers.

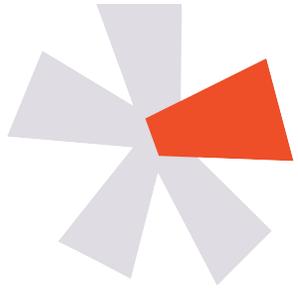
Core Approaches



Every sector has an opportunity to evolve their practice to consider core approaches that align with how young people see themselves and think about their futures. This may include:

- Designing solutions that target young people along a spectrum of emotional states — *surviving*, *striving*, and *thriving* — and developing impact measurements that leverage young people’s understanding of success.

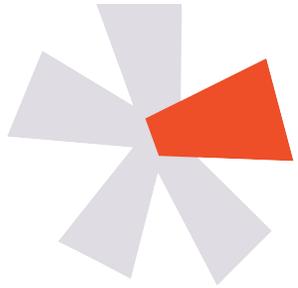
Programs



For program designers and educators, there are opportunities to adopt youth and learner-centered solutions such as:

- Integrating relationships and social capital through peer-to-peer strategies and near-peer strategies.
- Providing opportunities for career and personal exploration that allow youth to reflect on their own sense of what a good life is and what their individual goals are.
- Ensuring the broadest access to young people through in-person and online tools that allow them to independently seek information about career pathways and education.

Programs



For program designers and educators, there are opportunities to adopt youth and learner-centered solutions such as:

- Spotighting multiple pathways to life and career goals including college and non-college pathways.
- Acknowledging the multiple relationships and influencers that inform young people's behaviors and decision-making, and building intentional opportunities for adults in young people's lives to work together to support young people's attainment of their goals.
- Focusing on young people's socio-emotional development and self-identity exploration.

Narrative



Shifting mindsets toward new approaches will involve:

- Refining narratives that instill greater understanding and valuing of the roles of relationships, personal and career exploration, and multiple pathways to success among youth and the adults in their lives.
- Developing and sharing stories that name and normalize how young people, especially those living in households with lower incomes, are able to explore and experiment with career pathways.

Narrative



Shifting mindsets toward new approaches will involve:

- Promoting, among professional stakeholders, narratives that prioritize young people as changemakers in their own lives and the ways they experience education and career pathways as integrated sets of steps and relationships, in pursuit of a good life.

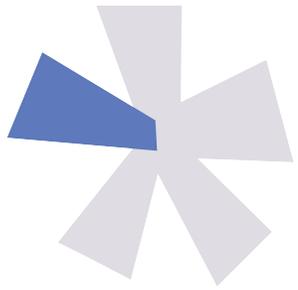
Research



Researchers can further validate and activate the research by:

- Conducting a cross-sectional, longitudinal study that examines how young people navigate career pathways and how ideas about *thriving* evolve over time.
- Developing a three-part Surviving, Striving, and Thriving Index, with indicators associated with each stage of youth development.

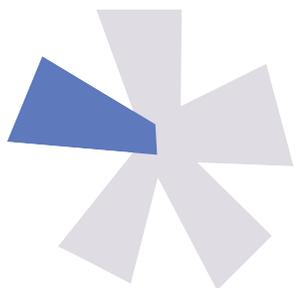
Philanthropy



For philanthropic leaders, the research offers guideposts for creating and cultivating youth-centered grantmaking strategies and adopting equity-based practices. Philanthropic leaders may consider:

- Creating youth-centered participatory grantmaking and initiating collaborative learning and practices.
- Investing in tools that will deepen the role of youth voices across key sectors of the field.
- Using institutional power/voice to help other funders understand social capital as a key missing component of the existing youth funding landscape.

Philanthropy



For philanthropic leaders, the research offers guideposts for creating and cultivating youth-centered grantmaking strategies and adopting equity-based practices. Philanthropic leaders may consider:

- Using convening power to build and incentivize funder collaboratives that can support organizations who help young people build social capital.
- Investing in research that aims to better understand how young people's occupational identity and perceptions of a good life change over time.

Partners & Resources



Research Partners

Equitable Futures, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to build stronger connections and alignment between K-12 schools and education, post-secondary institutions, and employers to improve labor market outcomes and promote paths to upward mobility and economic opportunity for Black and Latino young people and young people from lower income households. A vital component of this effort is a structured research program supported by this Initiative that explores, by engaging directly with young people, how they believe their occupational identity is developed, and how that identity informs their career goals and aspirations.

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research is a national public opinion research firm with special expertise in conducting research on emotionally complex, socially sensitive issues. Their unique methodology is used to unpack underlying attitudes and emotional reactions that impact behavior and decision-making and to develop effective message frameworks that enable deep attitudinal change.

Wonder: Strategies for Good is leading work to disseminate the findings from the research led by GSSR and to build a field of practice around these learnings. At Wonder, we're experts in messaging, storytelling, psychology, and opinion research. We believe curiosity and smart research create amazing, breakthrough moments to make the world a better place. We also understand that human beings are heartwired — that emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences shape our decisions on complex social issues — and use that knowledge to help our partners create social change.

Advisory Team: Research

The Youth Occupational Identity Formation research was informed and supported by an Advisory Team composed of the following members:

Romero Brown, Principal, Romero Brown Consulting

Nate Cadena, COO, Denver Scholarship Fund

Mary Gatta, PhD, Associate Professor of Sociology, CUNY-Stella and Charles Guttman Community College

Noel Ginsburg, Founder and CEO, CareerWise Colorado

Michael Lee, Director of Programs, Destiny Arts

Jane Margolis, EdD, Senior Researcher, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies

Brandon Nicholson, PhD, Founding Executive Director, The Hidden Genius Project

Andrea O'Neal, Senior Coach, Career Prep Program, Management Leadership for Tomorrow

Roz Pierson, PhD, Partner, Luminas LLC

Melissa Risteff, CEO and Co-Founder, Couragion

Ayele Shakur, CEO, BUILD

Nathaniel Smith, Founder and Chief Equity Officer, Partnership for Southern Equity

Advisory Team: Research Activation

This Advisory Team is working with Wonder: Strategies for Good to help design tools and resources for the field based on occupational identity and social capital research.

Austin Estes, Senior Policy Associate, Advance CTE

Ayana Gabriel, Senior Program Officer, Arthur Blank Family Foundation

Carmen Ross, Program Manager, Impact Strategy, Sacramento Region Community Foundation

Charline Alexandre-Joseph, Director of Workforce Development, Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership

Eshauna Smith, CEO, Urban Alliance

Francisca Angulo-Olaiz, Vice President, Community Engagement, Mile High United Way

Mike Lee*, Director of Programs, Destiny Arts Center

Nate Cadena*, Chief Operating Officer, Denver Scholarship Fund

Roz Pierson*, Partner, Luminas

Ruben Harris, Chief Executive Officer, Career Karma

Veronica Herrero, Vice President Strategy, City College of Chicago

Yalda Uhls, Founder, Center for Scholars and Storytelling at UCLA

Yutaka Tamura, Executive Director, nXu

*Denotes those who served on the previous research advisory team

Resources

For more in-depth discussion of the research and to download the report in brief, visit:

- [Striving to Thriving: Youth Occupational Identity Formation](#)

We will continue to release new tools and resources for the field.

For more information, visit EquitableFutures.org and [sign up for Wayfinders](#), our monthly email with the latest research and resources.

*All credited images in this deck were created by youth artists.



Credit: Jaedyn Nguyen

Occupational Identity Formation Among Black and Hispanic Youth and Youth from Households with Lower Incomes

Insights and Implications

June 2020



equitable
futures

A PROJECT OF THE
BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION