

WHO ARE WE MISSING?

UNDERSTANDING AND REACHING UNDERREPRESENTED PROSPECTIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS



In the midst of an economic boom, U.S. employers are struggling to find all the qualified workers they need. At the same time, an estimated 30 million Americans remain unemployed or underemployed, some working several low-wage jobs and straining to stay afloat.

In many cases, the only thing preventing these individuals from solid employment is a credential from a nearby community college. While community colleges offer a range of affordable programs, every institution offers some programs that routinely lead to high-demand jobs with strong wages. Yet the individuals most in need of economic mobility are not enrolling.

WHY NOT?

Some have had bad experiences with education, or heard negative opinions of college from family and friends; they don't trust that the institution will serve them. Some simply don't know about the opportunities at community colleges or in the workforce. For many, affordability and access are barriers.

But in many cases, the problem is that the colleges have been ineffective in communicating their value to these unemployed and underemployed adults and opportunity youth—16- to 24-year-olds who are neither going to school nor working full-time.

Increasingly, these populations represent a significant proportion of community colleges' prospective student pools. The national K-12 population, now about 3.5 million, is stagnating and expected to fall more precipitously in the coming years. Meanwhile, opportunity youth, low-income adults, and unemployed adults (all disproportionately comprised of people of color) number close to 30 million.

To help colleges better understand the motivations of these individuals and the barriers they face in considering a career and technical program, the Aspen Institute, with the support of the Siemens Foundation, partnered with Edge Research to convene eight focus groups and conduct a national survey of 1,885 individuals. This research revealed how these populations think about education, training, and jobs, and which messages are most likely to move them.

continued on next page >



AMONG THE KEY FINDINGS:

They don't believe employers want them.

More than one-third of survey respondents agree with the statement, "Employers don't really want to hire people like me," compared to one-quarter of the general population. Blacks in particular disbelieve that employers want them, because they have had bad experiences, including discrimination, in the workplace.

They lack information.

These populations were less familiar with community colleges in their region than was the general population. For instance, only 55 percent of unemployed populations were familiar with the community colleges in their region, compared to two-thirds of the general population. Even when respondents believe that better jobs exist, they are not sure where to turn for the best information about the jobs or the skills they might need, beyond the advice offered by family and friends.

They have lukewarm impressions of community colleges.

These populations are less positive about community colleges than is the general population. Across all populations, respondents who have heard of a college or have experience with it are more likely to view the institution positively. Underemployed adults are more positive about community college if they are more stable—working at least 40 hours at one job and earning more than \$26,000 a year. Unemployed adults are more positive about community colleges if they are men or interested in STEM fields.

There is widespread mistrust in higher education, regardless of institution type.

These audiences are not blank slates. Prior experiences in K-12 or with post-secondary education color how they think about future higher education opportunities. One bad experience or testimony about post-secondary education from within their network can outweigh multiple success stories. It does not matter which type of institution is responsible for the poor outcomes; the impact of one poor experience taints the reputation of all higher education institutions in the region. Audiences did not easily differentiate between for-profit and non-profit institutions.

They prioritize pragmatism, but still want to feel passion for their job.

These populations want economic stability and better hours, but they also want to care about their work. Skeptical that college will pay off, they seek a guaranteed return on their investment. They define that ROI more as job stability and a reliable paycheck than as work that inspires them. But they also aren't willing to pursue a program in a field that doesn't interest them—even if workers in that field are in high demand.

They need to hear specifics about program outcomes and support services.

These populations were skeptical of promotional language and overly generic and positive language that sounded "fluffy." They questioned the reliability of program descriptions, generalized outcomes (e.g., about an industry rather than a specific program), and benefits. Instead they seek concrete details about recent graduates' employment outcomes and information about practical supports that make education and training more feasible. They most valued information about how they can make community college work with their lives—messages about flexibility, financing help, and supports such as childcare, transportation, job placement, and free tutoring.



Some terms, particularly “new skills training”, are more effective than others.

These populations respond well to phrases including “new skills training,” “hands-on training,” and “real-world skills.” However, the words “college” and “vo-tech” are not effective. In focus groups, the word “college” is associated with debt and years-long programs geared almost exclusively toward young adults. “Vo-tech” is mostly misunderstood; most opportunity youth don’t know what programs and industries fall into that category, and they say the name implies inferiority.

They need to hear from peers and other trusted messengers that may not yet be heavily used as communication channels.

These populations most rely on family members, friends, and coworkers for information; they are most likely to be swayed by hearing from people like them about their own positive experiences, e.g. I want to talk to someone who knows my situation as a Black man, who walked this path, and can say ‘it worked for me, you’re like me, it can work for you.’ (Chicago, Opportunity Youth). Unemployed adults extensively use and trust career services and job placement centers, but other populations do not. Opportunity youth use social media the most but trust it the least. These populations trust religious organizations, school counselors, and nonprofit groups as reliable suppliers of guidance about jobs and training—but they don’t often use these sources of information to learn about college or training opportunities.

Employers’ endorsements of community college programs are also effective.

Many participants said that they want to hear about these types of programs from real employers, whether on a personal level (e.g. a former boss that knew me and knew what I was capable of) or more generally from reputable local employers in the community. They want employers’ reassurance that the program is in fact a reliable pathway to the jobs for which employers are hiring.

They recognize the importance of networks.

Black opportunity youth believed that the way to find a job is through networking with the right people, but they often lack access to these networks. In messaging, therefore, colleges should assure these students that at the college they will meet the right mentors and the employers they need to know.

They have a strong “hustle” spirit and are drawn toward entrepreneurship.

Many are budding entrepreneurs, trying to cater to areas that they consider in demand. Respondents described their desire for independence and control in the workplace or to “be your own boss”—especially those who had been mistreated or had negative work experiences, e.g. I get to work the times I want to, take a day off when I want to. The money you make is yours (Fort Lauderdale, Opportunity Youth). The gig economy (for Uber drivers and home crafters) and pop culture (house-flippers on HGTV, streamers on YouTube) create perceptions—accurate or not—about what’s possible.