

Walton Family Foundation Voices of Gen Z Study

Known Unknowns: Gen Z's Limited
Awareness of Non-College Pathways



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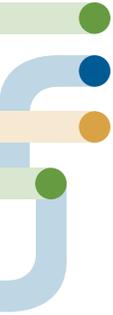
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Executive Summary and Key Findings

In 2024, Generation Z — children and young adults born between 1997 and 2012 — was expected to overtake the share of Baby Boomers in the U.S. workforce for the first time.¹ But as more young people graduate high school or college and enter the workforce, prior Walton Family Foundation and Gallup research has consistently found that most Gen Z students do not feel prepared for their career or educational futures.



About one in four high school students feel very prepared to succeed in college or apply for a job, and those who don't plan to pursue higher education are notably less optimistic and prepared than their peers.

If most Gen Z students are telling us they are not prepared for their futures, what do families, educators and policymakers need to do to help young people — particularly those not planning to go to college — feel more confident about their postgraduation lives and careers?

In April 2025, the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup partnered with Jobs for the Future (JFF) — a national nonprofit that drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to help more Americans secure quality jobs — to answer that question.

¹ Sy, S., & Quran, L. (2024, October 2). *As Gen Z overtakes boomers in the workforce, a look at the changing perspectives on jobs*. PBS NewsHour. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/as-gen-z-overtakes-boomers-in-the-workforce-a-look-at-the-changing-perspectives-on-jobs>

The survey of over 1,300 16- to 18-year-old Gen Zers and their parents or guardians, as well as just over 600 18- to 24-year-old Gen Z adults, explores the experiences these young people find most helpful in their career exploration journey and identifies systemic gaps that prevent students from pursuing — or in some cases, even learning about — their ideal postsecondary pathways.

The results demonstrate that Gen Z's trusted sources of career and education information — especially their parents, family and school resources — may not be having conversations about postsecondary options early or often enough. When these conversations do happen, they typically center on bachelor's degrees and paid work, to the exclusion of alternative postgraduation options, such as internships, apprenticeships, certificate and certification programs or entrepreneurship. Moreover, while young people lean heavily on their parents for guidance, parents are most likely to discuss the options that they themselves pursued after graduation, which may unintentionally limit their child's interest in a pathway that would better suit them.

This all reinforces a concerning trend: Less than half of high schoolers say they feel very prepared to pursue whatever postsecondary options they are interested in. However, the results also point to actionable solutions that would increase the next generation's readiness to enter the workforce, including diversifying parents' knowledge of all the pathways that are available to their child, and increasing opportunities for students to have practical experiences that inform their education and career goals.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 1** **Nine in 10 Gen Z high school students trust their parents for advice about career and educational opportunities**, but 47% of parents — including about one-third of parents of high school seniors — say they are not frequently discussing postgraduation plans with their child.
- 2** **More than half of parents say they know “a great deal” about paid jobs (60%) and bachelor’s degrees (52%),** and 37% say the same of associate degrees. Meanwhile, between 15% and 25% know a great deal about any other postsecondary option.
- 3** **Young people’s knowledge of postsecondary pathways relies heavily on their parents’ knowledge.** Students whose parents know a great deal about a career or education option other than four-year college or a paid job are three to six times more likely to themselves know a great deal about that option. However, parents often express limited knowledge about pathways they do not have personal experience with.
- 4** While students trust their teachers and counselors to provide them with career and educational advice, **the guidance schools provide is heavily focused on postsecondary education.** Fifteen percent of students say they have received “a lot” of information about career pathways that do not require a college degree.
- 5** **Less than half of high school students (46%) feel very prepared to pursue the postsecondary pathways they are most interested in.** Similarly, about three in 10 Gen Z adults say their high school did not prepare them for the postgraduation pathway they ultimately pursued.

Detailed Findings

1

High school students primarily trust their parents for guidance about their futures after graduation but also rely heavily on teachers and other school resources.

Today's high school students have access to more information about postsecondary opportunities than any prior generation. But while the internet provides these students with the ability to learn about career and education options from sources outside of their immediate communities and networks, **the only sources that most Gen Z high schoolers trust to provide them with this information are human:** their parents (90%), teachers (54%) and other non-parent family members (52%).

Moreover, the two next-most trusted sources are also personal connections: school counselors (48%) and friends (39%). Fewer than one in three students trust the information provided by any internet resources, such as career websites (30%), podcasts (9%) or posts on social media from people they do not know personally (8%).

Still, even with the abundance of postsecondary information available to students, most high schoolers have given limited thought to the kinds of jobs they want to have. Four in 10 students — including half of seniors — have thought “a lot” about the type of job or career they want to have in the future. High school girls are also more likely than boys to have given a lot of thought to their postgraduation futures (49% vs. 34%), while Black students (46%) are more likely than their White (41%) and Hispanic peers (37%) to say the same.

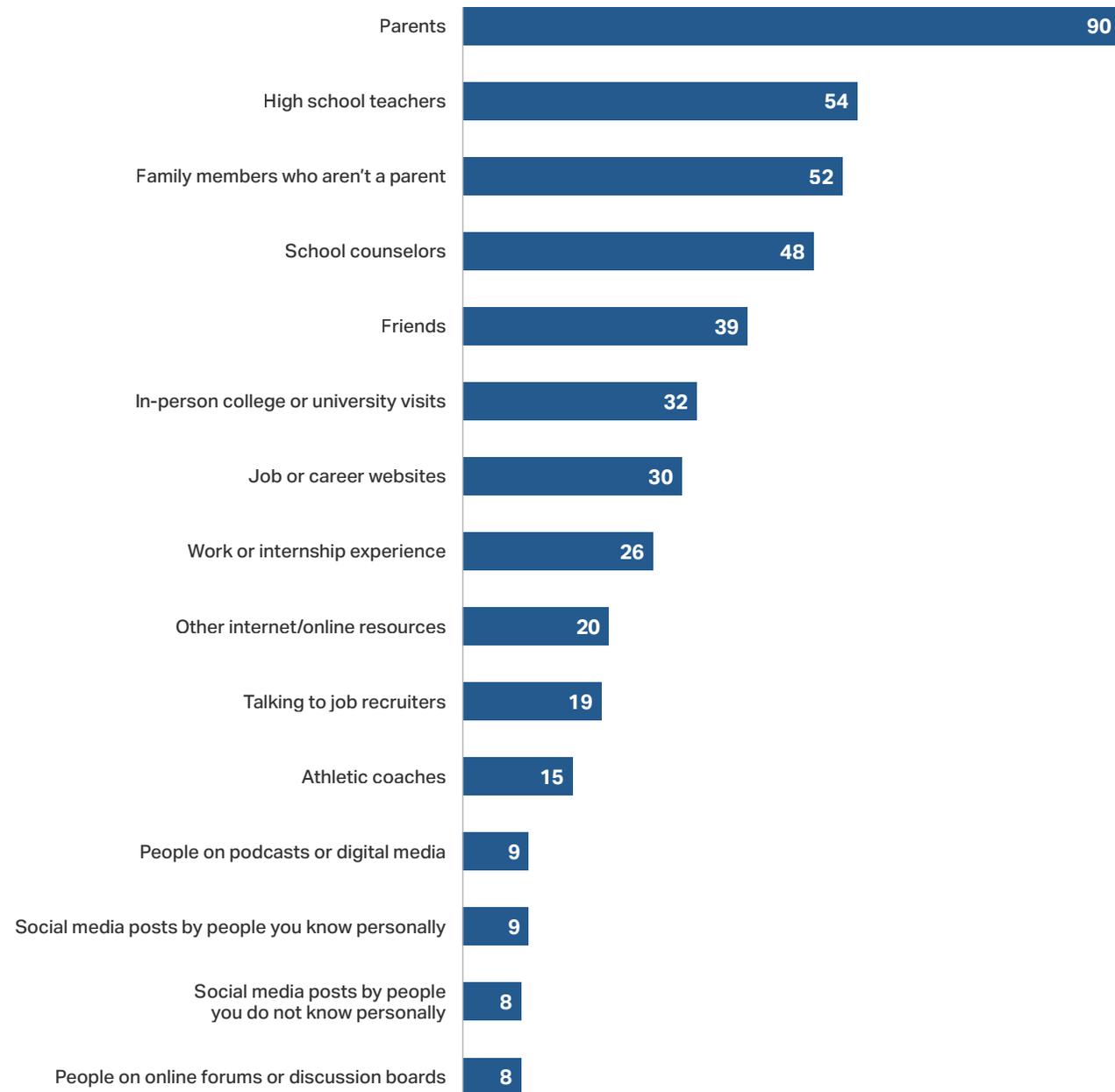


CHART 1

Gen Z High Schoolers' Trusted Sources of Postsecondary Information

Which of the following sources, if any, do you trust for advice on possible career or educational opportunities?

% Selected



Among Gen Z high school students

2

Parents are having limited postsecondary conversations, particularly about alternatives to college or a paid job.

Though parents are by far the resource that students trust most for education and career guidance, many parents are having only occasional conversations with their children about their postgraduation plans: Just over half of parents (53%) say they “frequently” discuss career and education options with their child.

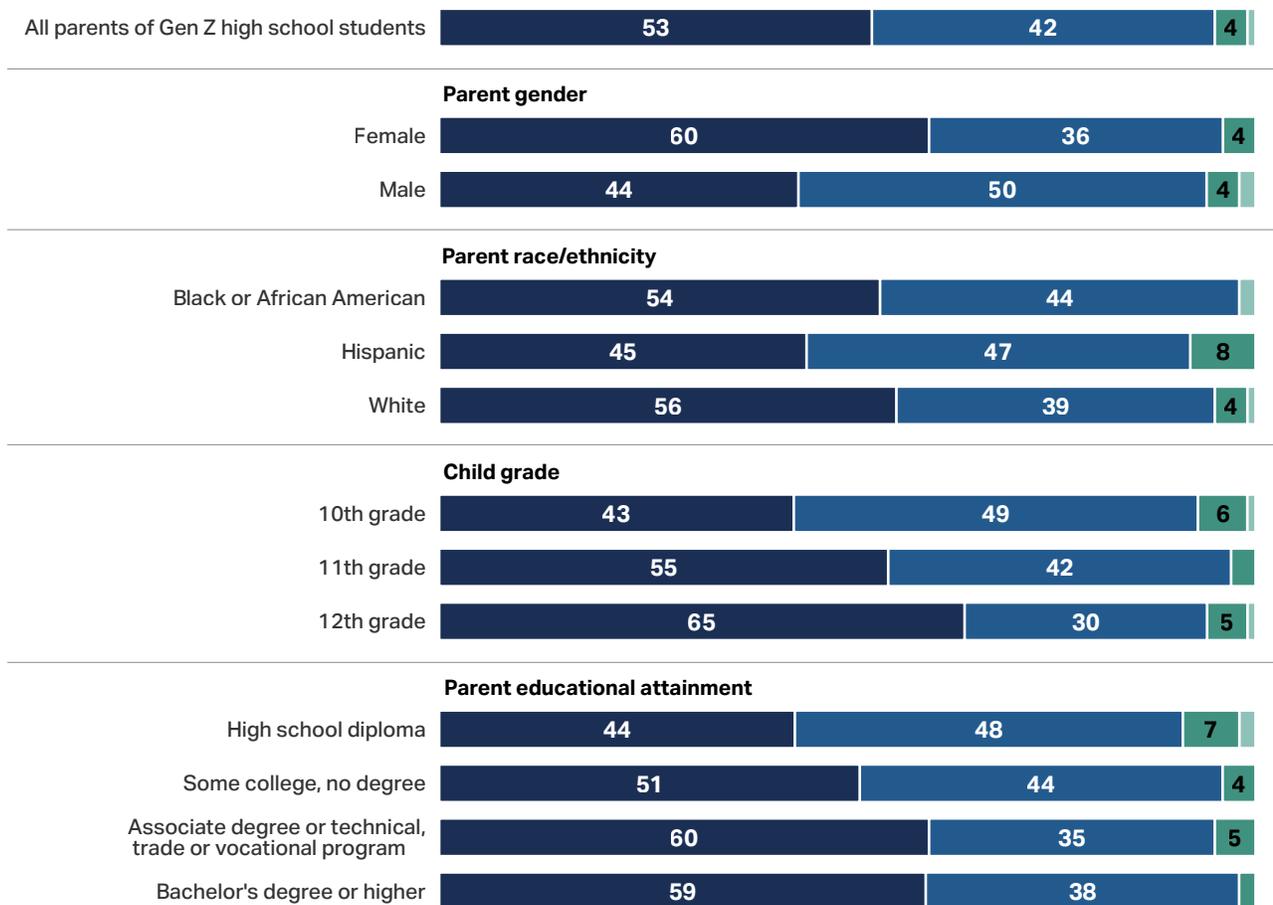
An additional 42% say they “occasionally” have these conversations, 4% “rarely” have these conversations and 1% have “never” had these discussions with their child.

CHART 2

Frequency of Parents' Discussions About Their Child's Postsecondary Options

How frequently, if at all, do you have conversations with your child about the possible career or educational pathways that exist after high school?

■ % Frequently ■ % Occasionally ■ % Rarely ■ % Never



Among parents of Gen Z high school students

Data labels <4% not shown in chart.

Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% +/- 1.

Parents of students in higher grades are somewhat more likely to report having regular conversations. About two-thirds of parents of high school seniors (65%) frequently discuss postgraduation plans with their child, compared with 55% of parents of juniors and 43% of parents of sophomores. However, this still implies that about one in three parents whose children are nearest to graduation are discussing their plans sporadically. Additionally, parents with a college education and mothers of all educational backgrounds are more likely than their peers to report frequently talking to their children about options after high school.

For many parents, infrequent conversations about career and education options — especially those outside of work and bachelor's degrees — may be related to their lack of knowledge about the options available.

Just under half of parents (46%) who frequently discuss their child's postgraduation future feel "extremely prepared" to give their child advice about their postsecondary options. Among parents who are not frequently having these discussions, 17% feel extremely prepared to advise their child. Similarly, parents who frequently talk to their child about their postgraduation plans are more likely to know a great deal about all eight postsecondary pathways the survey asked them about.

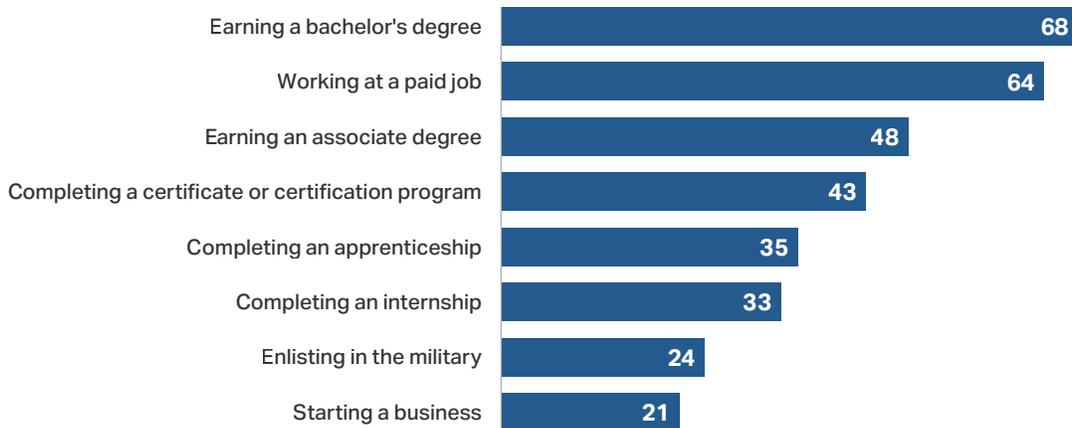
When parents are discussing postsecondary options with their child, the scope of those conversations is predominantly focused on the two options parents know most about. **About two-thirds of parents say they have discussed bachelor's degrees (68%) and paid work (64%) with their child**, while less than half of parents have discussed any of the other six non-four-year degree options. On average, parents have discussed three of the eight pathways with their child.

CHART 3

Postsecondary Pathways Parents Have Discussed With Their Child

Which of the following pathways, if any, have you discussed with your child?

% Selected



Among parents of Gen Z high school students

Parents' experiences not only shape their knowledge of postsecondary options, but also the conversations they have with their children about them. For example, 90% of parents who graduated from a four-year college have discussed bachelor's degrees with their child, compared with 48% of parents whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma. Conversely, parents without a bachelor's degree are more likely to have discussed paid jobs, apprenticeships and certificate and certification programs with their child than parents who have a four-year degree.

Even though parents and their children report greater knowledge about paid jobs than other postgraduation options, neither group is well-versed in important specifics of the job market.

At least 40% of parents say they know "only a little" or "nothing at all" about the types of jobs that are most in demand — both in their local communities, as well as nationally — and the pay and benefits that are associated with them.

Between 8% and 14% of parents know "a great deal" about any of these aspects of the job market or specific careers. On all six survey measures of job market knowledge, young people report knowing even less than their parents.

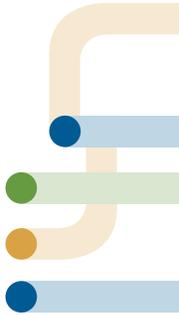
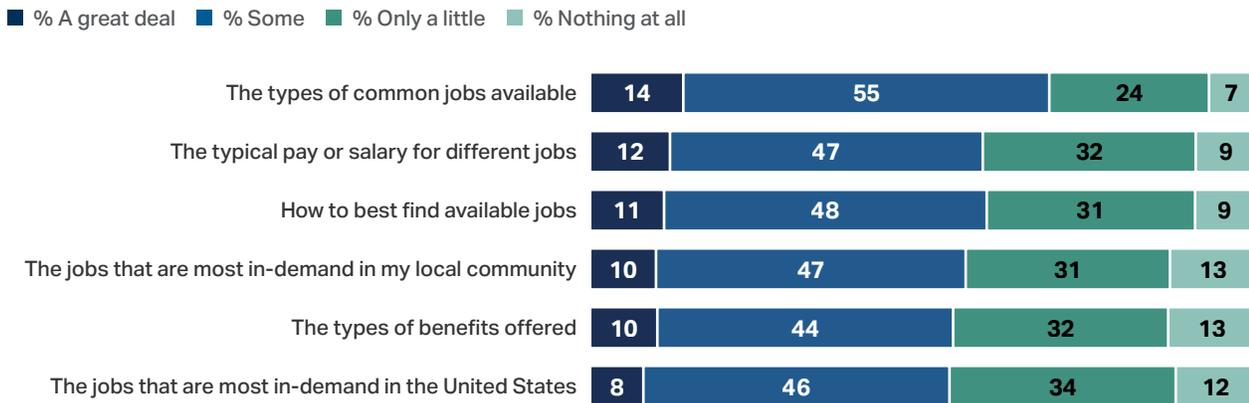


CHART 4

Parents' Knowledge of the Job Market, Pay and Benefits

How much, if at all, do you know about the following aspects of the job market?



Among parents of Gen Z high school students

Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% +/-1.

3 Gen Zers and their parents know relatively little about most postsecondary options.

Despite the abundance of information available to students about career and educational opportunities, most Gen Z students report limited knowledge about even the most common postsecondary pathways.

About one in three say they know “a lot” about earning a bachelor’s degree (33%) or working at a paid job (32%), while fewer than two in 10 know a lot about any of the six other options presented.

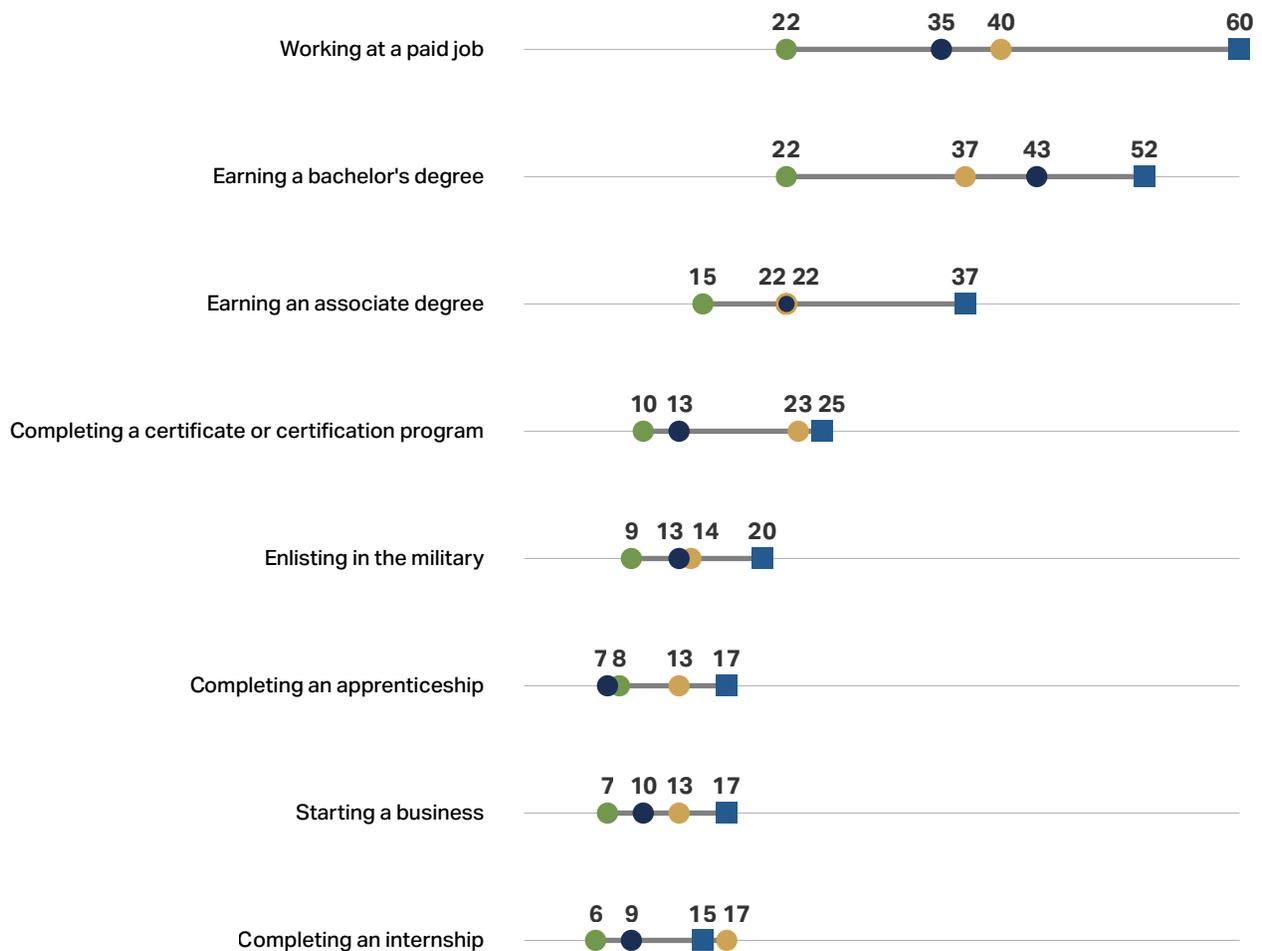
CHART 5

Gen Z Students' and Parents' Knowledge of Postsecondary Pathways

How much, if anything, do you know about the following pathways that exist [for your child] after high school?

% A great deal/A lot

● Gen Z sophomores ● Gen Z juniors ● Gen Z seniors ■ Parents of Gen Z high school students



Among parents of Gen Z high school students

Question wording and response categories differ slightly based on respondent group.

Knowledge of these eight pathways is somewhat higher among older students. However, even high school seniors report relatively limited knowledge of their postgraduation options. On average, 45% of sophomores know "a lot" or "some" about the eight postsecondary pathways presented. This increases to 52% among juniors, and 59% among seniors.

While parents consistently know more about postsecondary opportunities than their children, they are only somewhat more knowledgeable about most non-college options. One in four parents or fewer know "a great deal" about certificate and certification programs (25%), enlisting in the military (20%), starting a business (17%), completing an apprenticeship (17%) or completing an internship (15%).

Between 38% and 58% of parents say they know "only a little" or "nothing at all" about any non-college or paid job pathway; between 49% and 68% of Gen Z high schoolers say the same.

Parents' limited knowledge of these options highlights one risk of their children's heavy reliance on personal connections for guidance. Students' pathway knowledge is highly related to their parents' knowledge.

Aside from working at a paid job, students whose parents know a great deal about a postsecondary pathway are about three to six times as likely to know a lot about that pathway as their peers whose parents know less about that opportunity.

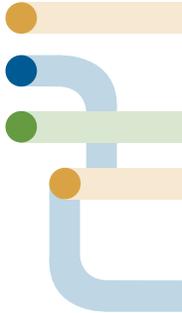


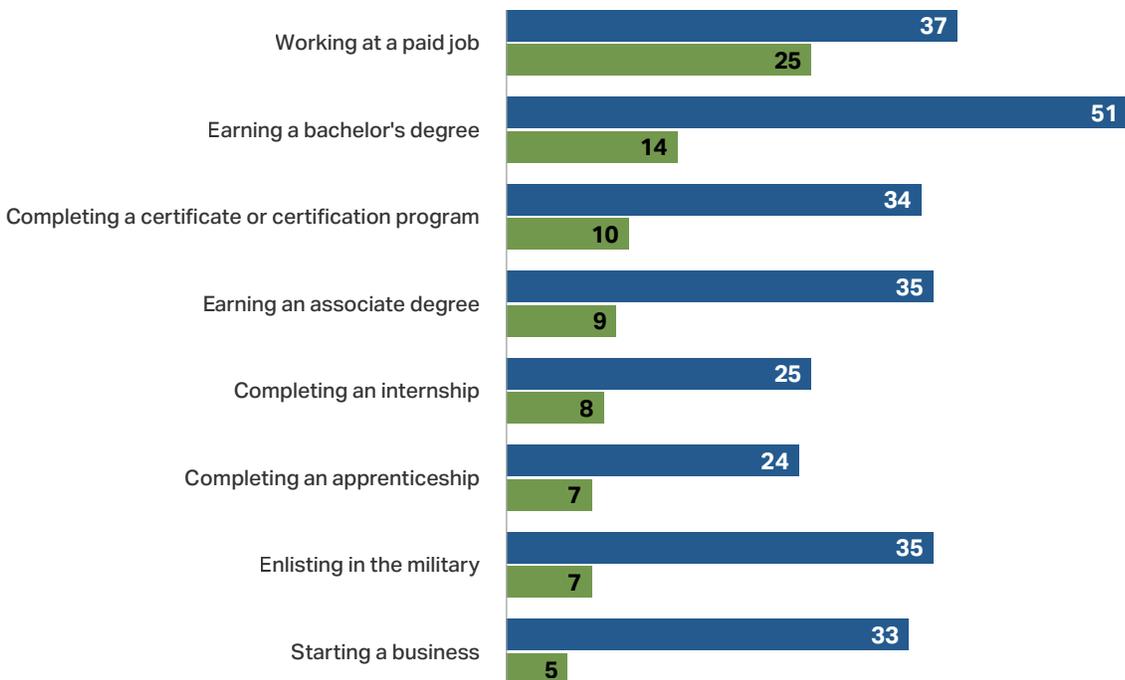
CHART 6

Gen Z Students' Postsecondary Pathway Knowledge, Based on Their Parents' Knowledge

How much, if anything, do you know about the following pathways that exist after high school?

% A lot

■ Parent knows a great deal about the pathway ■ Parent knows less than a great deal about the pathway



Among Gen Z high school students

The dynamics of this relationship likely vary from family to family. In some cases, parents' elevated knowledge about a pathway may stem from their child's interest in it, which inspired the parents to learn more, while in other instances, parents' knowledge may drive their child's knowledge.

For example: On average, parents without a bachelor's degree are more likely to know a great deal about non-college pathways than parents with a four-year degree. Similarly, adults who hold a bachelor's degree, associate degree or technical, trade or vocational certificate are the most likely to say they know a great deal about pursuing those respective credentials.

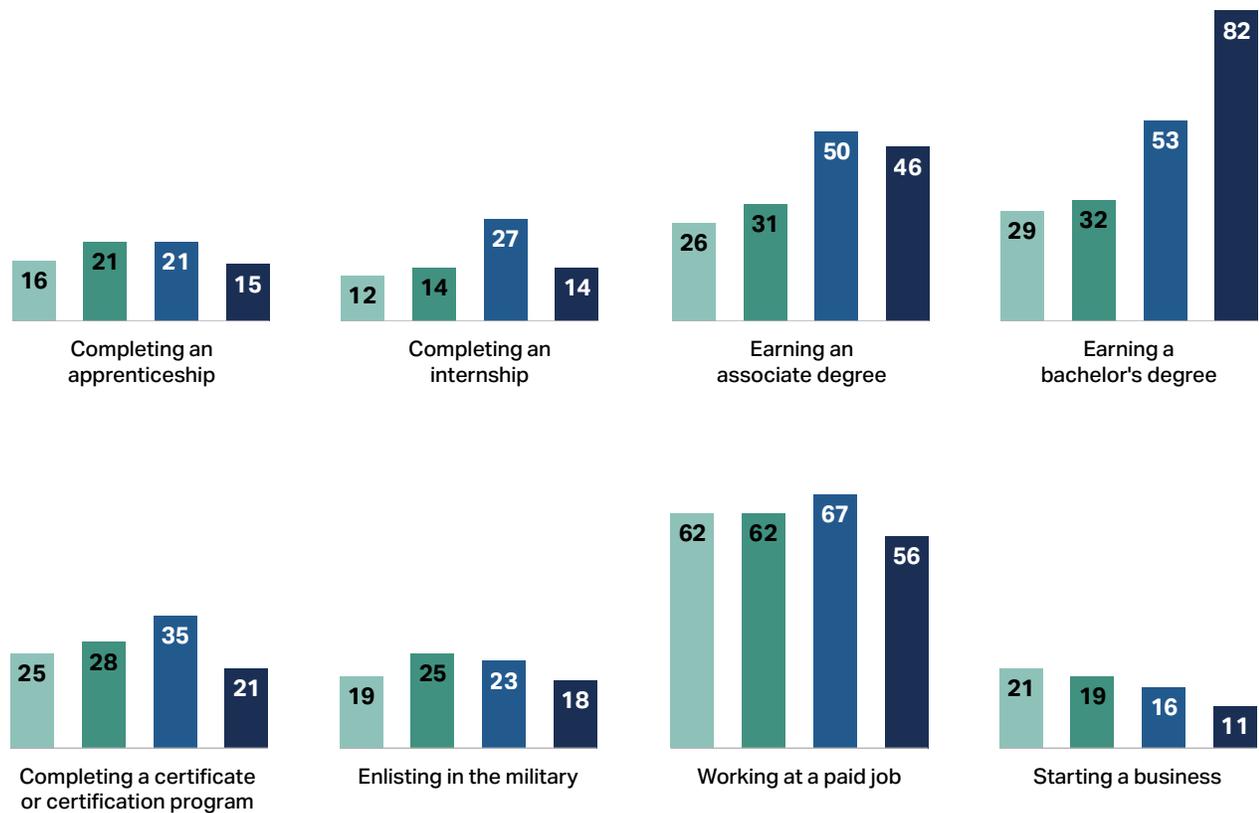
CHART 7

Parents' Postsecondary Pathway Knowledge, Based on Educational Attainment

How much, if anything, do you know about the following pathways that exist for your child after high school?

% A great deal

■ High school diploma or less ■ Some college, no degree ■ Associate degree or technical, trade or vocational program ■ Bachelor's degree or higher



Among parents of Gen Z high school students

4 Schools are an important resource for postsecondary guidance, but they are not adequately informing or preparing many students.

If students' most trusted sources — their parents and guardians — lack knowledge about career and educational pathways and are not talking with them about their options, students will likely rely on other sources to fill the gaps. Outside of parents and other family members, Gen Z high school students are most likely to trust two school-based resources for postsecondary guidance: teachers and school counselors.

Though helping students with their college and career planning is part of a school counselor's job, students are not only just as likely to trust and rely on their teachers for direction but also find their input more valuable. Seventy-five percent of students say their teachers have been "extremely" or "somewhat" helpful in providing them information about career and educational pathways, compared with 62% who say the same of their school counselors (though just 16% of students say either their teachers or counselors have been extremely helpful). This gap may reflect teachers' more intimate knowledge of their students' strengths and interests, as well as the high caseloads borne by school counselors. During the 2023-2024 school year, the average student-to-counselor ratio in the United States was 376 to 1.²

2 American School Counselor Association. (n.d.). *School counselor roles and ratios*. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/about-school-counseling/school-counselor-roles-ratios>

Regardless of the roles that teachers and counselors should play, students report that their school is providing limited guidance related to anything other than postsecondary education. Fifteen percent of Gen Z high school students say their school has provided "a lot" of information about career pathways that do not require a college degree. An additional 42% of students have received "some" information about non-college pathways from school sources, while 43% have received "a little" information or "no information at all."

Recent graduates' experiences also suggest high schools are primarily focused on preparing students for college, rather than alternative educational or experiential pathways. When asked how well their schools prepared them for postsecondary pathways, between 60% and 65% of 18- to 24-year-old Gen Z adults say their high school prepared them for paid jobs and college education; less than half say their school prepared them for any other pathway.

On average, Gen Z adults say their high school prepared them for three of the eight pathways; one in 10 say their school did not prepare them for any of these options.

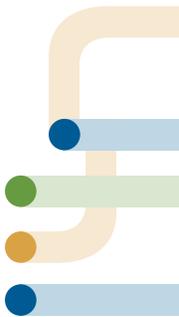
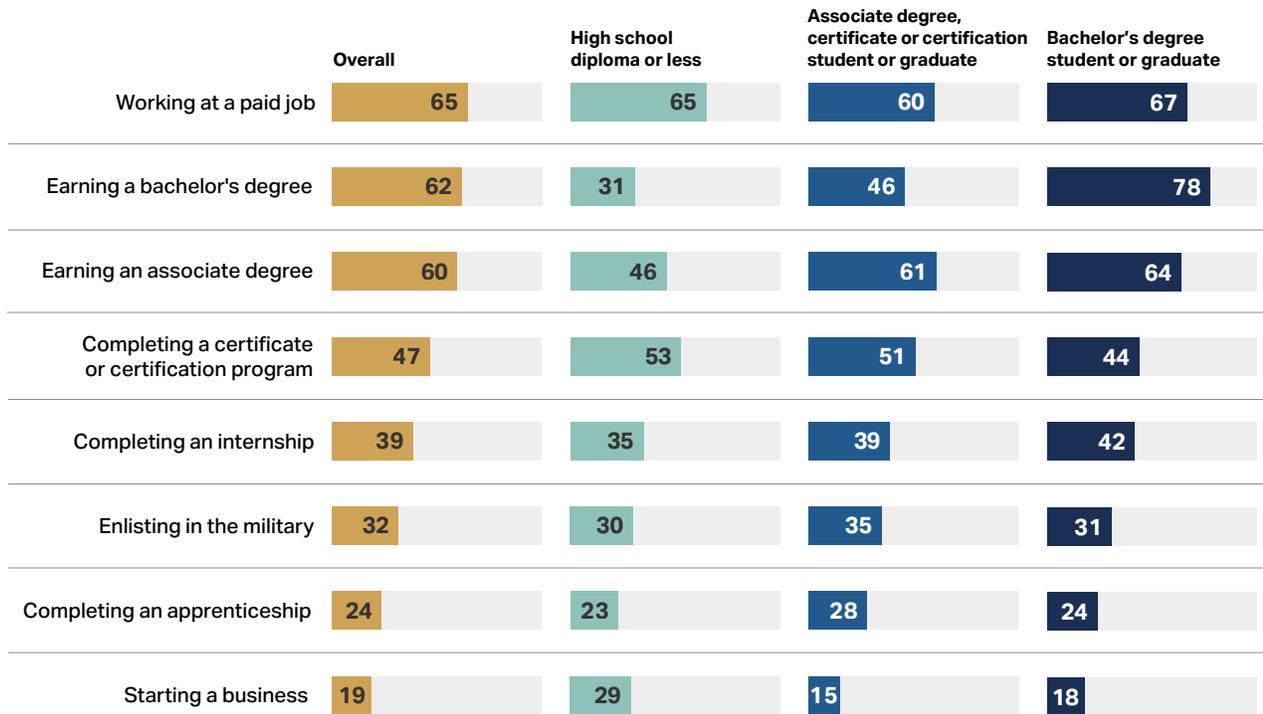


CHART 8

Gen Z Adults' Postgraduation Preparedness, Based on Highest Educational Enrollment or Attainment

In your opinion, did your high school prepare you for...?

% Yes

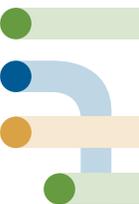


Among Gen Z adults

Most Gen Z adults who enrolled in or completed a bachelor's degree program (78%) say they felt well-prepared by high school. Among those who enrolled in or completed an associate degree or certificate program, 61% say they felt prepared to pursue an associate degree, while 51% felt prepared to pursue a certificate or certification. Among those who have not enrolled in or graduated from a degree program, 65% felt ready for the workforce.

While it may be unrealistic to expect students to feel prepared for every possible postgraduation pathway, even when examining the career and educational paths that Gen Z adults ultimately pursued in the first year after high school, 70% say their high school prepared them for those pathways.

This implies that three in 10 Gen Z adults did not feel their school adequately prepared them for their postgraduation lives.



5

Despite limited knowledge and conversations, many Gen Z students are at least somewhat interested in non-college alternatives.

In general, Gen Z high school students express the greatest levels of interest in the paths they know most about: 45% of students are “very” interested in enrolling in a bachelor’s degree program in the first year after high school, while 40% are very interested in entering the workforce. **Fewer than two in 10 students are very interested in any other postsecondary option.**

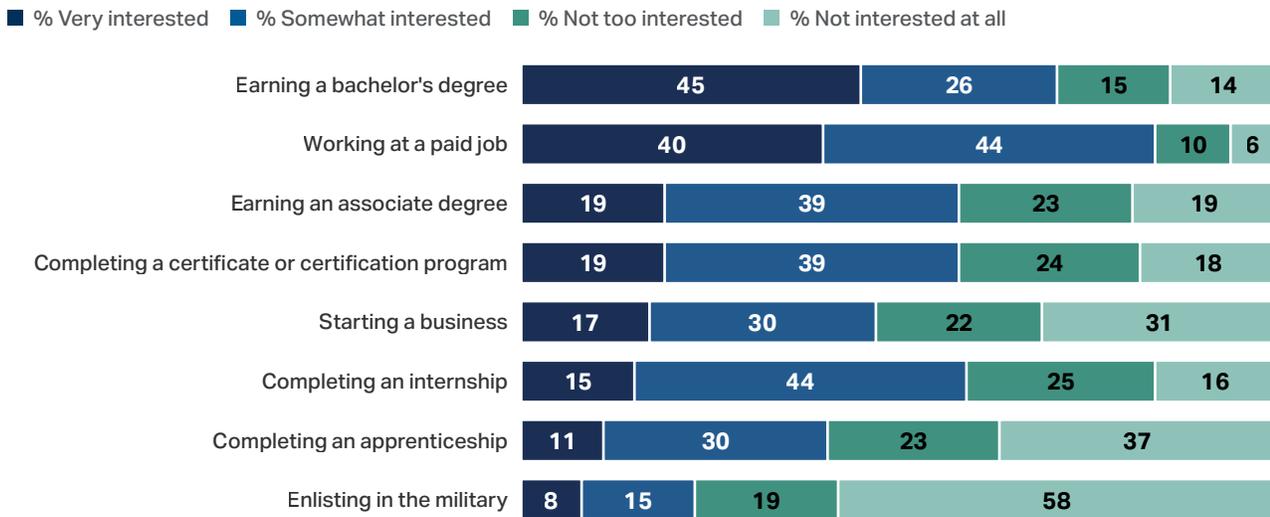
Although relatively few students express high levels of interest in any one alternative to four-year degrees and paid jobs, most students are somewhat interested in at least one.

Nearly half of high school students (49%) are “very” interested in at least one postsecondary option other than a paid job or a bachelor’s degree, and an additional 43% are “somewhat” interested.

CHART 9

High School Students' Interest in Postsecondary Pathways

How interested are you in pursuing the following pathways within the first year after finishing high school?



Among Gen Z high school students

Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% +/-1.

This lower level of interest in alternatives to bachelor's degrees and paid jobs may be related to students' lower levels of knowledge of these options, rather than a true lack of interest. Students who say they know at least "some" about a pathway other than four-year college or paid work are generally two to three times more likely to be very or somewhat interested in pursuing that pathway after high school.

In addition to increasing students' awareness of these education and career alternatives, having conversations with students about these options may increase their interest in pursuing them.

On average, children whose parents have discussed a postsecondary option with them are about twice as likely to say they are at least somewhat interested in that pathway as their peers whose parents have not talked with them about that option.

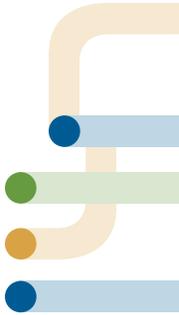
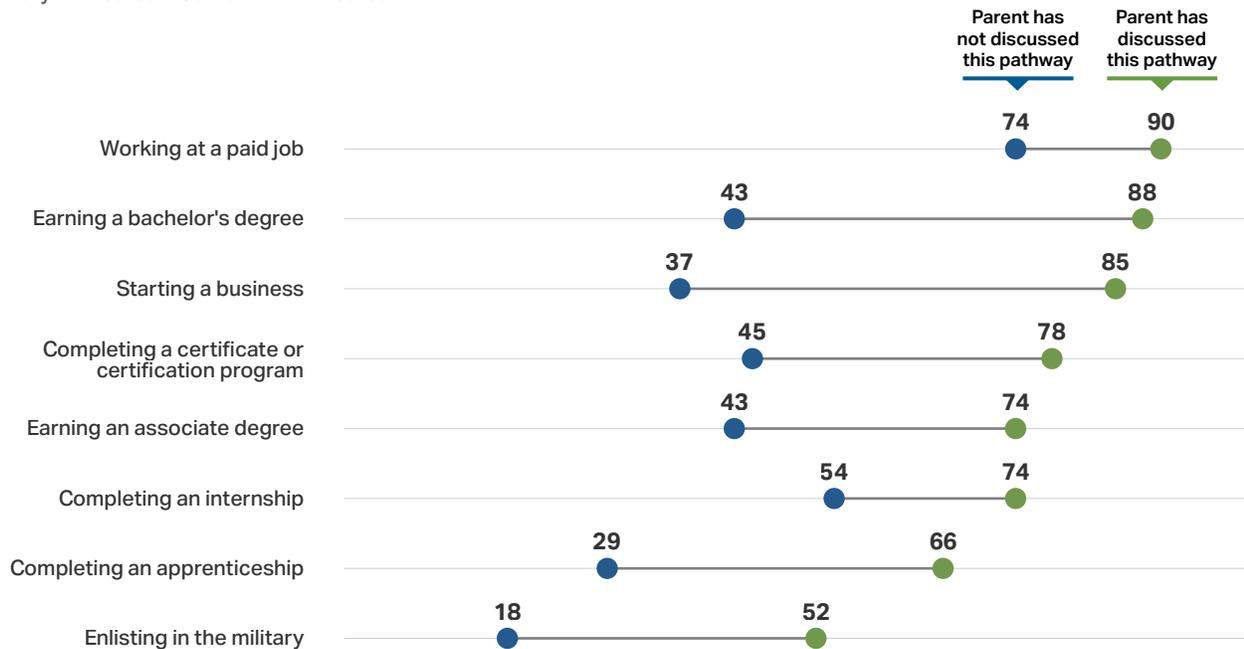


CHART 10

Relationship Between Postsecondary Pathway Conversations and Student Interest

How interested are you in pursuing the following pathways within the first year after finishing high school?

% Very interested + Somewhat interested



Among Gen Z high school students

6

Most high school students, including seniors, do not feel prepared to pursue their preferred pathway.

In conjunction with limited knowledge of the full array of postsecondary options available to them, as well as infrequent guidance from their most trusted sources, most high school students express some doubt about their preparedness to pursue their postgraduation aspirations.

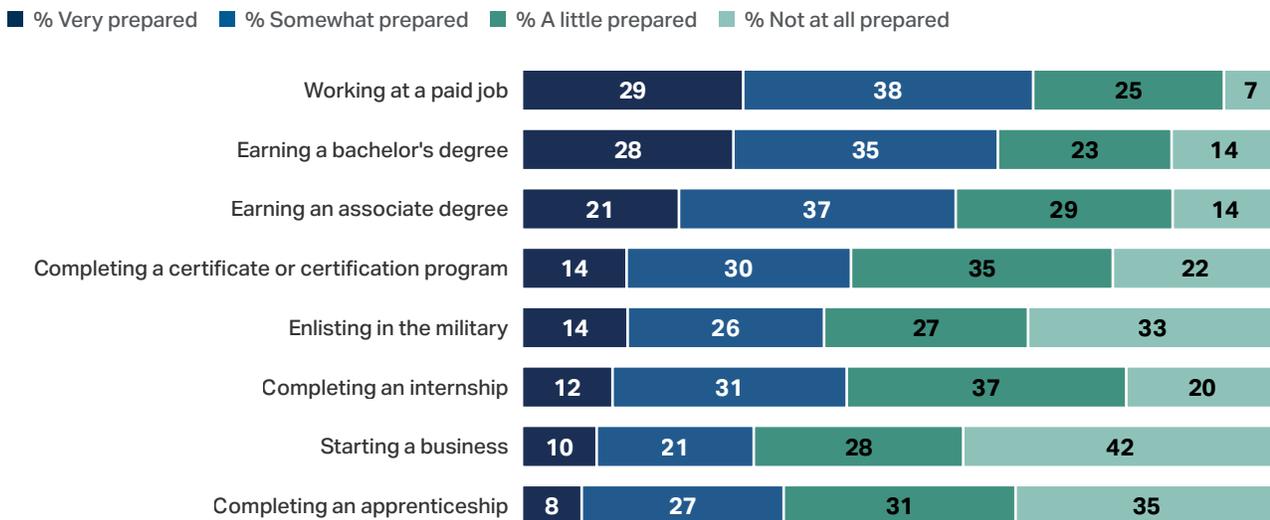
Fewer than three in 10 students say they feel “very prepared” to pursue any of the pathways that they express any interest in.

CHART 11

High School Students' Preparedness to Pursue Postsecondary Pathways

How interested are you in pursuing the following pathways within the first year after finishing high school?

Among those at least a little interested in pursuing each pathway



Among Gen Z high school students

Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% +/-1.

Even when looking only at the pathways that students are very interested in, on average, 46% of students feel very prepared to pursue their preferred postsecondary options.

Perceived preparedness is somewhat higher among students in their last two years of high school: 31% of sophomores feel very prepared for the pathways they are very interested in, compared with just over half of juniors and seniors (both at 52%).

Although many high school students do not feel well-prepared to pursue the pathways they are interested in, those who had certain experiences found them helpful to the decision-making process.

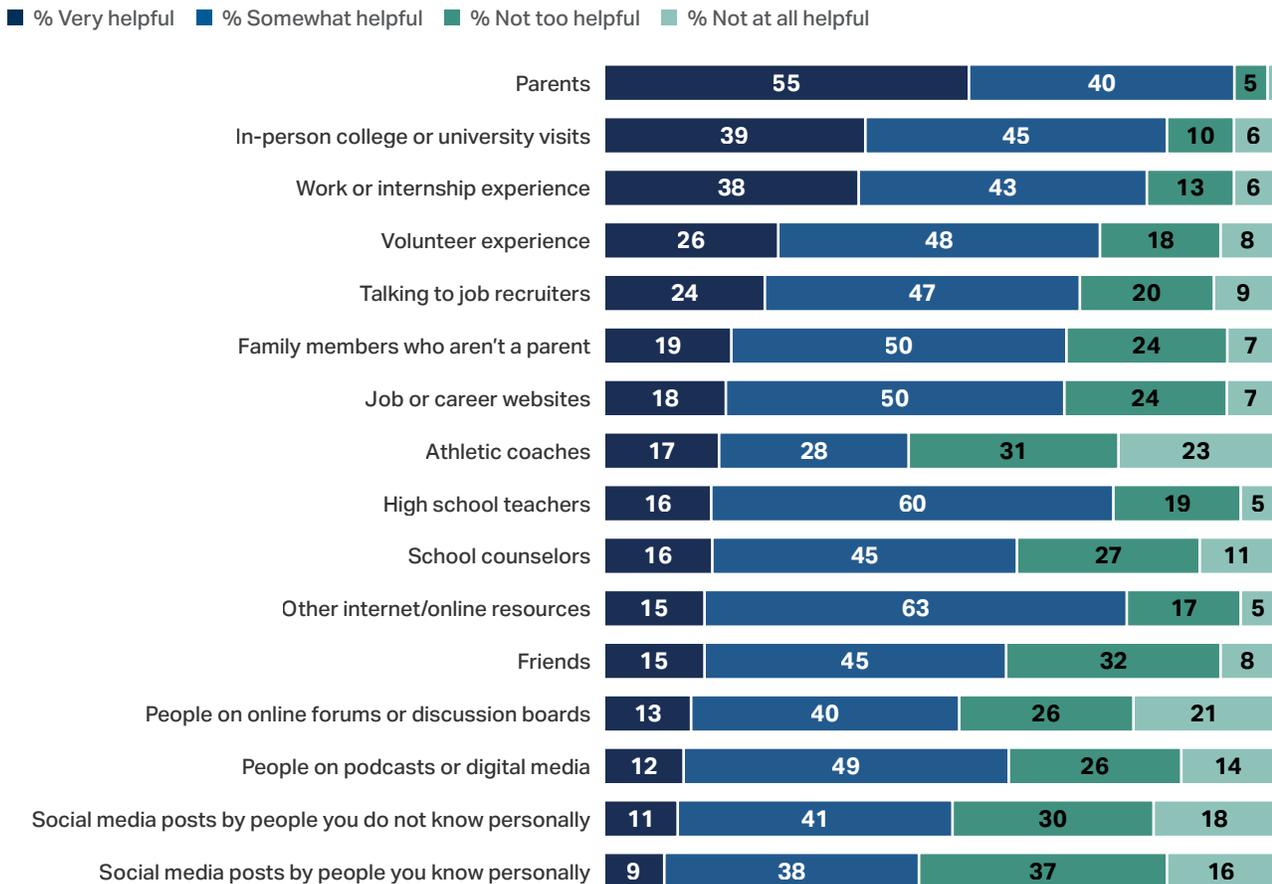
Among those who have had each experience, nearly four in 10 students say in-person college visits (39%) and work or internship experience (38%) were “extremely” helpful in informing their decision about the postsecondary options they hope to pursue. About one in four say the same of volunteer experience (26%) and talking to job recruiters (24%).

Unfortunately, these are also among the activities that students are least likely to have participated in: About half of students have never talked to a job recruiter (51%) or had a job or internship (47%), while 37% have never visited a college or participated in a volunteer activity. Meanwhile, other resources that students consult more frequently — including teachers, counselors, friends and non-parent family members — are less likely to be extremely helpful to students’ career and education exploration.

CHART 12

Helpfulness of Postsecondary Career and Education Information Sources

How helpful, if at all, have each of the following been when learning about possible career or educational pathways after high school?



Among Gen Z high school students

Due to rounding, percentages may sum to 100% +/-1. Students who indicated they have never used a resource were excluded from the results.

Implications

According to a 2023 JFF estimate, 56% of workers in the American labor force are not working in a quality job.³ While research demonstrates that a four-year college degree consistently leads to higher lifetime earnings than other credentials or pathways, it is not the only path to a quality job. However, it is the path that high school students are most aware of.

Despite their heightened knowledge of college pathways, less than half of high school students are very interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree, and 49% are very interested in pursuing something other than a four-year degree. Still, for many students exploring their postgraduation options, college is the pathway that they hear about most often — particularly if their parents are themselves college graduates.

Considering the limited knowledge students have about apprenticeships, internships, certificates, certifications and entrepreneurship, current interest in these options may not reflect the latent interest Gen Zers have in these pathways.



Students who know more about these paths are significantly more likely to be interested in pursuing them. Therefore, if students' knowledge of non-college pathways were to match the level of knowledge they have about college, the interest gap between college and non-college pathways could potentially narrow as well.

However, because of the heavy reliance students place on their parents, teachers and other trusted adults for guidance, students' own knowledge of postsecondary options will likely continue to be limited by the extent to which these adults know enough to advise young people about the full suite of options available.

³ JFF. (n.d.). *Our North Star: Quality jobs for 75 million people.* Jobs for the Future. <https://www.jff.org/our-north-star-quality-jobs-75-million-people/>

As a result, improving high schoolers' postgraduation preparedness starts with improving parents', teachers' and counselors' knowledge of and ability to discuss a diverse array of postsecondary pathways. This is particularly important for those students who do not intend to pursue college: While half of high school students who are very interested in pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree feel very prepared to do so, between 29% and 42% of students who are very interested in an internship, apprenticeship, certificate or certification program or starting a business currently feel very prepared to do so.

Unfortunately, less than half of parents know a great deal about any pathway other than four-year college or paid jobs, and many parents appear to be avoiding these conversations because they do not feel prepared enough to have them.

Additionally, about four in 10 parents know little to nothing about critical aspects of in-demand jobs. Meanwhile, 85% of students are not hearing a lot about non-college pathways from their schools.

Until parents and schools are provided with the resources they need to have frequent, informed discussions with their students about both college and non-college pathways, as well as the jobs that they can lead to, many young people may be left unaware of, and unprepared for, career and educational opportunities that are the most appropriate, affordable or accessible pathways to a quality job.



Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted April 15-25, 2025, with a sample of 1,928 16- to 24-year-olds living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landline and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 1,327 16- to 18-year-old children were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 601 18- to 24-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the sample of the parents of the 1,327 16- to 18-year-old children, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,257 children still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 671 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 4.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.



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