



## How Young Adults Choose a Career Path

November 2017

## Overview

Every year, thousands of young adults in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County participate in workforce development programs offered in their schools and community organizations. Through these programs, young adults can enhance their education, explore career goals, develop close relationships with mentors who understand their day-to-day experiences, and break through social barriers to economic mobility.

The young adults in programs Partner4Work funds are navigating the dawn of their professional lives. Partner4Work interviewed approximately 35 young adults who participated in In-School and Out-of-School<sup>1</sup> workforce programs to gain insights into their decision-making process when choosing a career. Some young adults entered the programs with an understanding of what career they want to follow and why. Others did not have a specific occupation in mind, or encountered barriers as they explored career interests, and need the guidance and opportunities available through workforce programs to help them choose a career path.

This report highlights program participants' perspectives on these issues and the most common factors influencing their decisions, including parents or mentors, program experience, perception of jobs in the future, employment barriers and, of course, personal interests. While the degree to which participants envisioned a definitive career plan varied widely, they commonly expressed how the various types of work experience they received in their program enabled them to explore career interests, identify new career goals and even gain access to employment opportunities.

## Sources of Inspiration

Some young adults have family members or life experiences that inspire them to pursue specific careers. The career choice of one participant's father, an engineer in the U.S. Army, served as inspiration:

*"I just know I like hands-on and I love math...so, I was like, I can try that. I could do engineering in the Navy."*

For others, a life experience influenced their choice. As one participant, who is pursuing a construction career, related:

*"I was staying on the Northside, this was about two years ago, I had a slumlord. So, that's another reason why I got into the field."*

Some young adults are learning about operating a business through personal experiences:

*"My aunt actually wants me to do some stuff for her house. Got to cut down some trees for her, build a retaining wall, patio, put some floors in her house. So, the stuff I've already learned came in handy. As of right now, I'm trying to make a work plan for [us] to sign and the people I'm bringing with me to sign. So, we know she'll pay us and she'll know we get the work done."*

---

<sup>1</sup> In-School Youth programs serve low-income young adults still attending high school. Out-of-School Youth programs serve young adults who have dropped out of school or have a high school diploma, but encounter barriers to employment such as homelessness, basic skills deficiency or a criminal record.

These quotes show that some young adults are thinking critically about the needs of their community and the successes of those close to them. Program providers are well-positioned to help young adults recognize and realize new ideas about their professional futures by facilitating interactions between young adults, the important adults in their lives and their communities.

### **Making Choices**

A few participants displayed confidence in their interests and abilities to achieve their career goals. For example, one participant conveyed an interest in a specific area of science:

*“I want to become a marine biologist, [specifically] ichthyology, which is the study of fish, like sharks and different kind of fish. ... Pretty much I want to major in biology and history.”*

Others expressed general career interests, influenced by mentoring, career exploration and work experiences made available by a program funded through Partner4Work. “I am going to be an engineer, but I don’t know which one,” explained one participant. “But, I think since I recently had a visit to the McGowan Institute of Medical Research, I think I want to be a biomedical engineer.” Another participant is exploring an interest in interior design by interning in a related field:

*“It’s an architecture firm. It’s a small business...I kind of get a feel for, like, my career field in particular.”*

For some, an internship leads to other opportunities. One young adult who worked at a hotel during the summer Learn & Earn program and continued as an intern through an In-School program, explained:

*“My boss wanted me...to stay longer. So, I asked if I could get some hours in and...I was actually hired in November.”*

Others gained insights, through career exploration activities, that may affect their choices. “I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, but then I went on that job shadow and was like ‘uh-oh.’ See, I don’t want to sit in a cubicle all day.”

Career exploration helped some young adults identify a career path leading to entrepreneurship. As one young adult explained, “Then once you get done, complete four years [of apprenticeship], you’ll be a master of carpentry, which means if you want to, you can open up your own business.”

### **Thinking About Job and Financial Security**

Partner4Work spoke with a number of participants without definitive career goals, but who clearly are thinking about the labor market.

Many worry about automation. Pittsburgh-area young adults are eyewitnesses to technologies that have the potential to transform the economy. Some young people, having seen self-driving cars and automated customer-service kiosks at restaurants, conveyed concerns about the future labor market:

*“You see...self-driving cars, I’m sure dialysis can go away, too. Nobody is going to have a job. There will be a kiosk where you can do everything by itself. No more customer service. It is all going to computers.”*

One reaction to automation involved identifying careers in which technology may not be able to displace workers. As one young adult explained:

*“We always need electricians. We need plumbing. That’s always going to be around.  
... So, the job security is going to be higher.”*

Others identified skilled labor jobs they feel can provide financial security. Participants in Out-of-School programs most commonly expressed this pragmatism. These programs tend to support their participants’ pursuit of a high school credential (e.g., GED), while providing career training, work experience and credentialing for fields that do not require a college degree. The young adults Partner4Work interviewed in Out-of-School programs expressed interest in pursuing the skilled professions in which their programs offer training, such as construction, manufacturing, food service and facility management.

### **Opening Doors**

It is undeniable from participants’ perspectives that career exploration, pre-apprenticeships, job shadowing, internships and employment influence their decision-making process when choosing a career. More than anything, young adults found that the various types of work experience they received in their program enabled them to explore their career interests, identify new career goals and gain access to employment opportunities.

The young adult programs funded by Partner4Work support this priority. This includes career and skills assessments to help young adults identify career goals. Young adult program staff work with each participant to develop strategies to match services to their educational, personal and financial needs, as well as interests. Programs connect young adults with adult mentors who have achieved levels of success and can provide career guidance. Many programs also offer occupational skills training that enables participants to learn practical skills and earn industry recognized credentials.

Through Partner4Work’s provider network, young adults have access to additional career exploration and work experience programs, including the Learn & Earn summer employment program, and specialized entrepreneurship and STEM programs. The participants’ observations expressed in these interviews support Partner4Work’s emphasis on providing work experience and career exploration activities for young adults who might not otherwise have those opportunities.

Researchers:  
Matthew Aelmore, Ph.D.  
Dillon Moore, MPA  
Vera Krekanova Krofcheck, Ph.D.

Editor:  
Nathan Petrillo

Partner4Work develops a thriving workforce in the Pittsburgh region by connecting funding, expertise and opportunities for employers, job seekers, agencies and policy-makers. Learn more at [www.partner4work.org](http://www.partner4work.org).