Beyond the Four-Year Degree

STRATEGIES TO ADVISE STUDENTS
on Multiple Postsecondary Pathways

ESG | Education Strategy Group

Recent national trends
show a shift toward multiple postsecondary pathways.

46%

of parents said they hoped their child would do something other than attend a four-year college after high school.

Source: Gallup (2021)

40%

of parents who prefer their child attend college also expressed interest in career-related learning opportunities such as internships or apprenticeships.

The Public's Growing Doubts About College 'Value'

Americans aren't questioning the importance of higher education, but they're concerned it is unaffordable and unavailable for too many people.

Source: Inside Higher Ed (2022)

More High-School Grads Forgo College in Hot Labor Market

Share of young people seeking higher education slips since pandemic began

Source: Wall Street Journal (2023)

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Students need clear, consistent messaging
on how to navigate pathways.

Many local communications efforts are focused on career pathways and CTE options; less is communicated about the **changes in the economy, how those changes alter workforce expectations, and the full scope of postsecondary options available for success.**

Approaches to promote high-quality career options can face resistance both from communities that have been historically marginalized and those historically privileged; gaps persist in parents thinking career pathway options are valuable, but questioning the resonance for their own child. Stronger college _**and**_ career messaging is needed.
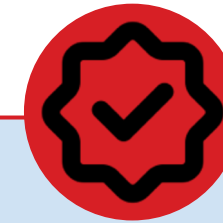
While parents and students highly value the advice they receive from educators, counselors, and third-party support organizations, **those individuals often have limited knowledge, awareness or training regarding the jobs, skills, and the educational paths that lead to good career outcomes**.

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To help communities meet this need, ESG developed a communications toolkit.

In partnership with the Carnegie Foundation of New York, ESG released a toolkit to help districts, schools, and other leaders who support a student's educational journey effectively communicate with families about today's economy and the different paths to success.

These ready-to-use resources include key messages, graphics, printable materials, customizable pieces, and more from which communicators can build and execute their own contextualized communications plan.

This work served as a starting point for the Walton Family Foundation-funded Pathways Access and Awareness Project.

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Defining "Multiple" Postsecondary Pathways

There is no commonly-used, holistic naming for the broad array of postsecondary opportunities available to students after high school, including two- and four-year degree programs, apprenticeships and workforce opportunities, and short-term credentials of value.

The organizations participating in this initiative use several terms that they have thoughtfully determined to resonate with their communities (e.g., "college and career pathways" and "progressive pathways").

To demonstrate the value of each pathway, it's important to ensure our language remain asset-based. Therefore, we avoid using terms such as "non-traditional," "alternative," or "non-bachelor's degree" pathways.

In this resource, we refer to them simply as "multiple postsecondary pathways."

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About the Pathways Access and Awareness Project

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The Pathways Access and Awareness Project

With the generous support of the Walton Family Foundation (WFF), ESG partnered with and learned alongside **seven leading organizations** as they piloted new initiatives to expand awareness of and access to multiple postsecondary pathways.

OPPORTUNITY AUSTIN

College Advising Corps

PEER FORWARD
FUELED BY COLLEGE SUMMIT

OneGoal.

get2college
WOODWARD HINES EDUCATION FOUNDATION

GET SCHOOLED

shift_ed

Direct-to-Student Communications
texting, chatbots, social media, videos

Capacity Building of Advisors
training modules, databases, new staff roles

Curriculum and Programming
courses, college and career fairs, summer bridge programs

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Identifying Organizations for Pilots

To gain a broad understanding of approaches in the field, ESG aimed to identify organizations to participate in the Pathways Access and Awareness Project across a range of:

Organization Types
- *national college access organizations*
- *state or regional intermediaries*
- *communications firms*

Approaches
- *content*
- *capacity*
- *channels*

Geographies
- *region*
- *urban*
- *rural*

Scale
- *localized models*
- *state-led efforts*
- *multi-market scaled approaches*

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The Cohort Experience

To support the visioning, implementation, and evaluation of their pilots, organizations engaged in the following:

Grant Funding
average of $285k to support implementation activities

Learning Series
ongoing virtual meetings to share national best practices and discuss shared problems of practice

Implementation and Evaluation Plans
codified plans for pilots

1:1 Support
regular check-ins with ESG staff to discuss early learnings from pilots

Meet the Pilots

Austin Chamber of Commerce

The Austin Chamber of Commerce helps support the execution of Opportunity Austin (OA), a five-year comprehensive economic development strategy to grow jobs and develop talent to diversify our economy.

GEOGRAPHY
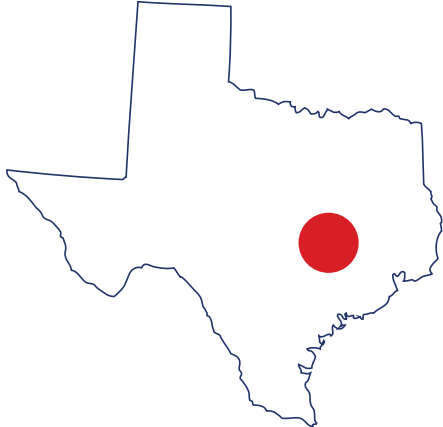
Four local school districts in Austin, Texas area
Austin ISD, Pflugerville ISD, Round Rock ISD, and Hutto ISD

SCALE

18,000
high school seniors and recent graduates

PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

55%
Hispanic

7%
Black

52%
Low-Income

ESG

The [Austin Chamber of Commerce](#)'s pilot partnered with school districts to **target high school seniors and recent graduates without a postsecondary plan to participate in a summer bridge program** focused on postsecondary career and workforce credentialing options.

Students used the Chamber's virtual 512 Career Bridge platform, powered by Nepris, to **connect with employers and training providers** to learn about in-demand careers in the region and received **text messages** and **virtual career and college counseling** through the Chamber's OneLogos RedKite platform.

The Chamber also expanded **messaging campaigns across social media** and other dissemination channels to increase awareness around in-demand postsecondary career pathways.

OPPORTUNITY AUSTIN

Key Activities and Outcomes:

- Over 13k texts and 2,100 phone calls to students
- Over 1M TV impressions and 286k social media impressions from messaging campaigns
- At 61%, outpaced state average for direct-to-college enrollment by 20 percentage points
- 35% increase in local community college enrollment for new students

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College Advising Corps

College Advising Corps is a national organization that provides direct-service college advising from recent college graduates to nearly 80,000 students in 19 states and across all 50 states virtually. Its mission is to increase opportunities for students by making education beyond high school more accessible and equitable.

GEOGRAPHY

◆ **Targeted States**
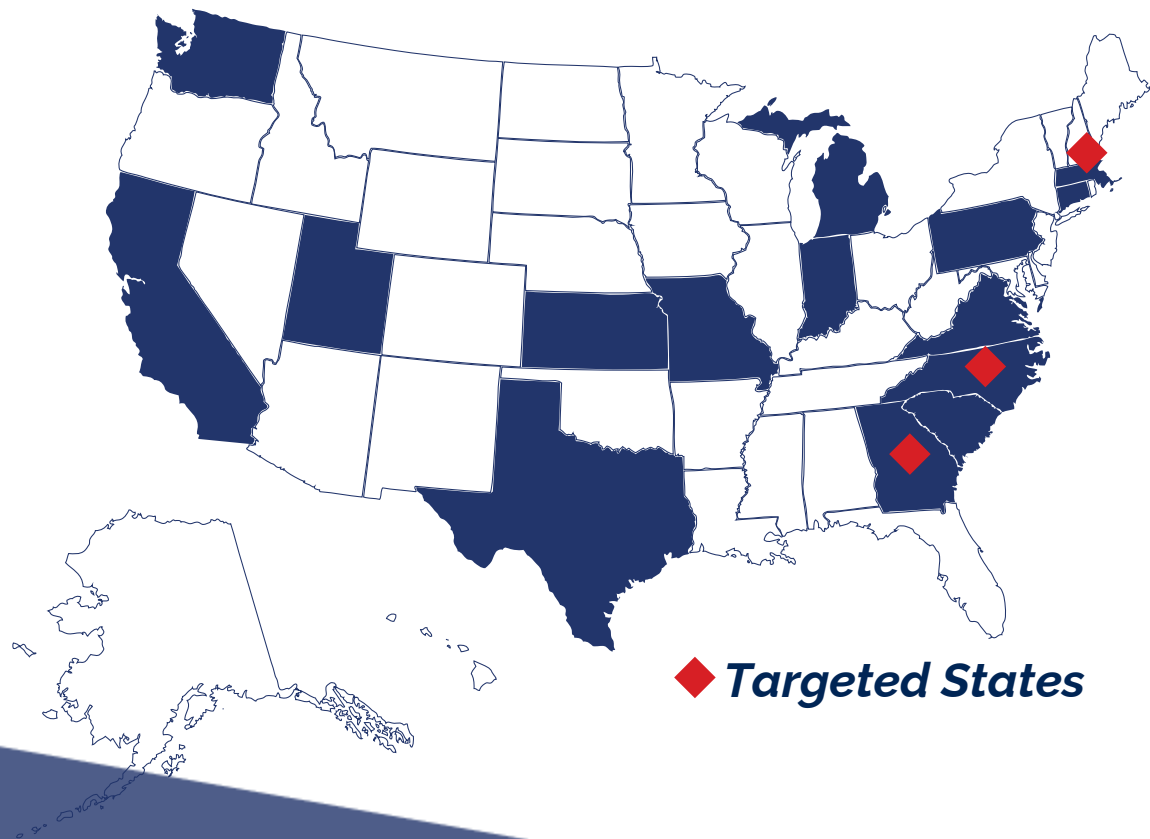
SCALE

211,377
students served
in grades 9–12
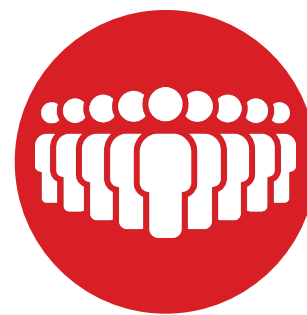
PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

44%
Hispanic

18%
Black

66%
Low-Income

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[College Advising Corps](#) (CAC) **built and disseminated e-learning training modules accessible to all 800 in-school advisers in 19 states** to increase advisers' knowledge of diverse postsecondary and career pathways that lead to equitable labor market outcomes.

CAC also used **artificial intelligence chatbot messaging to provide direct-to-student and parent text messages** to deploy content on multiple postsecondary pathways.

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Increased advisor awareness of career pathways through career and education pathways e-learning course.
- Chatbot sent messages to over 3,000 students and received over 10,000 messages.
- 89% of students found the chatbots reminders and tips helpful.

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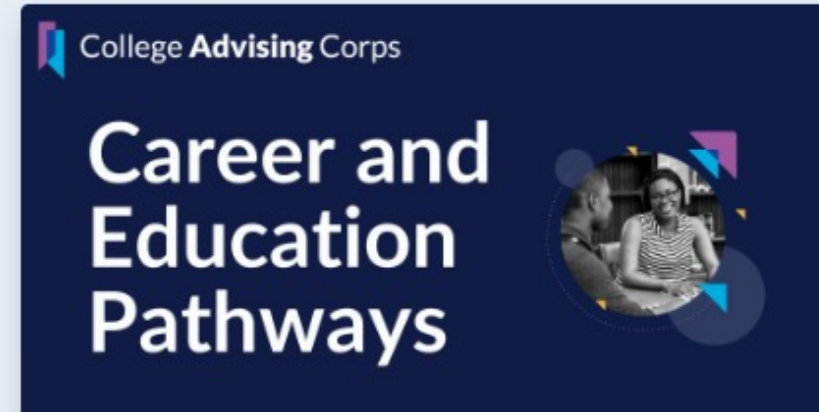
Get Schooled helps young people get to college, find first jobs, and succeed in both. They create youth-friendly, research-based, actionable content about postsecondary and career pathways; provide personalized virtual advising via text and email; and engage youth in our content on social media.

GEOGRAPHY
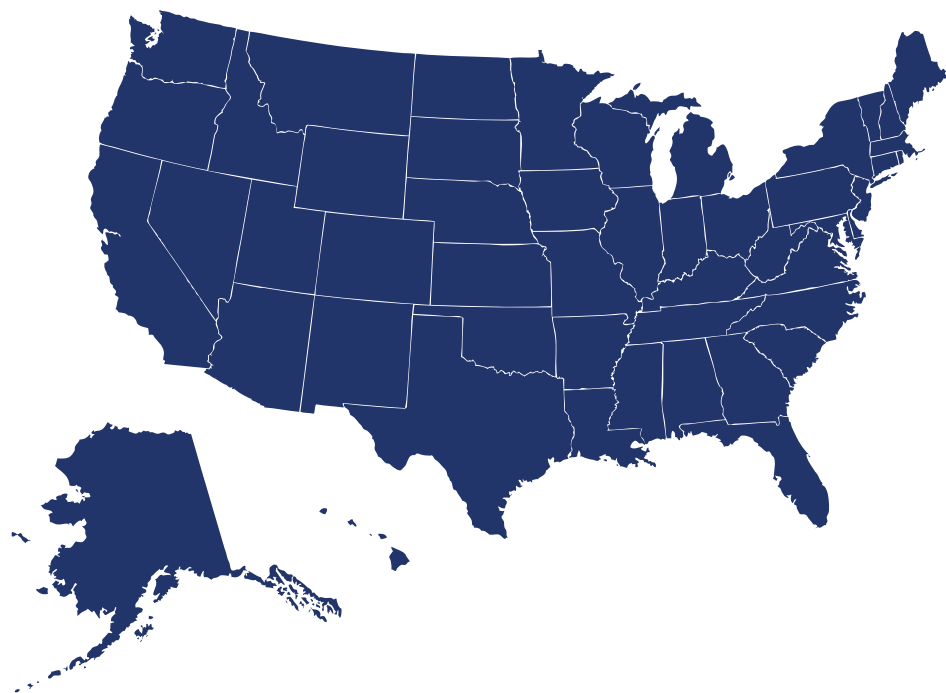
SCALE

38M
youth reached across web, social media, partnerships

46K
youth registered with student accounts

25K
youth received personalized, 1:1 advising

PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

22%
Hispanic

27%
Black

63%
Low-Income

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Get Schooled launched a **direct-to-student digital communications campaign around multiple postsecondary pathways,** including website content, videos, social media, and texting.

Get Schooled used its pilot to better resource "The Way" **- short form, near-peer, early career videos on their website and distributed through social media -** and micro-lessons delivered via text.

Get Schooled **targeted content and drove engagement through data-driven marketing efforts, such as paid ads, SEO, and tracking of KPIs** (e.g. page views, texts sent, social media impressions, etc.).

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Increased awareness of multiple pathways through online content reaching 20k views
- 255K engagement and impressions across social media posts

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1. **The Way: Career Stories to Find Your Way**
   Get Schooled • 627 views • 1 year ago
   1:00

2. 🔑 **Unlocking Your Future Military Service**
   Get Schooled • 15 views • 2 weeks ago
   3:38

3. 🔑 **Unlocking Your Future Apprenticeship**
   Get Schooled • 47 views • 1 month ago
   3:40

4. 🔑 **Unlocking Your Future Associate Degree**
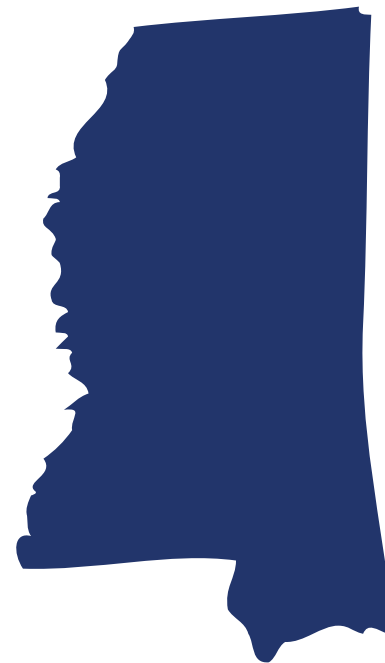   Get Schooled • 24 views • 3 weeks ago
   4:02

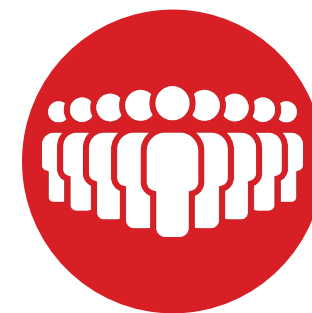The **perfect** career path **doesn't exist.**
Discover your way.

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Get2College is a college access program of the Woodward Hines Education Foundation in Mississippi.

GEOGRAPHY

SCALE

30,000

11th and 12th grade students

ESG

Get2College's pilot **built career pathway resources for a "Career Exploration" unit for Mississippi's College and Career Readiness (CCR) course, a new requirement for high school graduation.** These resources aimed to increase awareness of available jobs in Mississippi that pay a living wage and assist students as they explore careers, choose college majors, and find right-fit colleges.

They also **leveraged a Pathways Advisory Group to provide feedback on the lesson plans and resources developed for the course,** including testing products such as YouScience, Virtual Job Shadow, and day-in-the-life video development**.**

Get2College also created an **interactive dashboard showcasing in-demand and growth jobs specifically within Mississippi.** It will be incorporated into our CCR workbooks and teacher training. The data will be used in teacher training for the CCR course, in Get2College's individual counseling services, and in their high school and adult college guidebooks.

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Redesign of the Career Exploration unit in the state College & Career Readiness curriculum for the 2023-26 years.
- Increased students' awareness of high-quality career pathways in Mississippi by 49% as assessed by student survey.
- Increased CCR Teacher awareness of high-quality career pathways in Mississippi by 76% as assessed by pre-training and post-training survey.

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get2college
Woodward Hines Education Foundation

Students   Educators   About   Book an Appointment

Mississippi Careers are waiting for you

Choosing a career can feel overwhelming—but it doesn't need to be. Find the tools you need so you can have the future you want.

Find the perfect fit

Jump-start your success by using your skills, interests, and opportunities to discover a career that's uniquely YOU.

Take the interest survey →

get2college
WOODWARD HINES EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Welcome to the Mississippi Top Jobs Explorer

Get2College has put this tool together to help Mississippians explore the wide range of careers available across the state. For a quick overview to learn how to navigate the Mississippi Jobs Explorer: https://youtu.be/qEYxi3MDEZs.

The tool will default to only show occupations that have a minimum average salary of $33,540 (~$17 per hour), which is the family-sustaining wage for a family of two in Mississippi. You can adjust that up or down by selecting a different family size and salary as your minimum. Additionally, you can narrow the list to specific industries or careers, to your region, or by education level. For more information about a specific occupation, just click on the occupation name and it will take you to more information.

Occupations are listed in order of the most "In Demand," which is calculated by a combination of the average salary, average number of openings, and expected growth. If you would like re-sort by one of the measures, scroll to the bottom of the page. All data is sourced from the MS Dept of Employment Security & O*NET.

Living Wages by Family Size ⓘ
Show Occupations having Wages at or above the selected ALICE Living Wages Amount

Wages Not Listed	Less than a Living Wage	$21,924+ One Adult	$33,540+ One Adult One Child	$35,244+ One Adult One Child with childcare	$36,048+ Two Adults	$51,927+ Two Adults Two Children	$55,980+ Two Adults Two Children with childcare

Industry	Region ⓘ	Career Cluster		Typical Education Level
(All) ▼	MS Statewide ▼	(All) ▼		(All) ▼

Occupation Click to view institutions list	Average Annual Wage MS Statewide	Average Job Openings MS Statewide	Employment Growth % MS Statewide	Average Years Post-High School Education (0-8 Years)
Nurse Practitioners	$109,550	250	24%	
Health Specialties Teachers, Postsecondary	$162,670	200	24%	
Medical and Health Services Managers	$100,680	330	18%	
Financial Managers	$95,120	410	17%	
Physical Therapists	$91,960	110	20%	
Registered Nurses	$61,250	2,100	12%	
General and Operations Managers	$89,350	2,520	6%	
Management Analysts	$75,570	260	12%	
Speech-Language Pathologists	$67,250	150	27%	

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OneGoal.

OneGoal is a national organization that is working to ensure that every young person in America has a real opportunity to pursue their greatest postsecondary aspirations. They provide student-facing postsecondary success curriculum, professional learning, and executive coaching to transform systems-level visions.
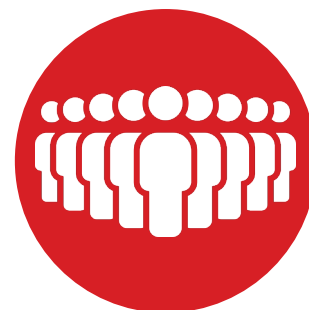
GEOGRAPHY

OneGoal Regions (Chicago, NYC, Houston, Atlanta, Bay Area, and Massachusetts)

SCALE

3,500
juniors across all regions

2,300
seniors across all regions

PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

53%
Hispanic

35%
Black

93%
Low-Income

ESG

In its pilot, OneGoal **leveraged existing regional databases of high-quality progressive pathway options to build a national database** that students can engage with at scale.

OneGoal also **leveraged an alumni base of "progressive pathway" fellows to showcase the real-life experience of peers** and used their structure of "career" and "academia" pathways for cohorting students during the high school experience.

Finally, OneGoal **developed an early prototype for how to track progress to completion of these pathways that can be standardized across regions**; and tested the efficacy of a national "help desk" and its ability to provide timely support to progressive pathways.

OneGoal.

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Increased seamless enrollment rates into high-quality progressive pathways among students who do not choose a 2- or 4-year degree option.
- Increased knowledge and confidence in OneGoal teachers when advising students on progressive pathways, as measured by self-reported survey data.
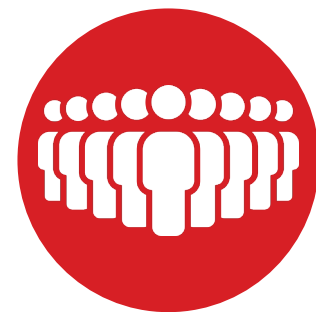
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PeerForward is a national non-profit that transforms the lives of low-income youth by developing a corps of high school and college students who lead their peers to and through postsecondary planning and college completion.

GEOGRAPHY

Lansing, MI

SCALE

1,500
students

PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

21%
Hispanic

43%
Black

79%
Low-Income

ESG

PEER
FORWARD
FUELED BY COLLEGE SUMMIT

[PeerForward](#) **expanded its curricula, training, and programming model for its peer-to-peer advisors to integrate multiple postsecondary pathways.**

As part of this expansion, PeerForward **designed and launched a new year-long, for-credit Work Based Learning course for Peer Leaders.** The course created a pathway for College Advising, integrating classroom learning about the professional requirements and postsecondary landscape, with work-based learning directly advising their peers.

Peer Leaders **executed campaigns and employed a case management approach to guide high school students to complete necessary steps to identify and enroll in a postsecondary program of best fit.** In addition to piloting the course curriculum and structure,

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Peer Leaders hosted monthly 1:1 Office Hours between October and April, supporting anywhere from 25-80 seniors each month on topics such as college applications, scholarships, FAFSA completion, and graduation guidance.
- 18% increase in FAFSA completion rates at one HS.
- Deeper collaboration with school and community partners.

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Identify & Recruit

Identify teams of 11th-and 12th-graders and adult supporters to become PeerForward Peer Leaders and Advisors.

Train & Inspire

Peer Leaders receive 60+ hours of training in Lead[er] Development, Campaign Organizing, and Postseco[ndary] Admissions; educators also are trained and suppor[ted] digital curriculum and other tools.

Lead Schoolwide Campaigns

With the support of our PeerForward Coaches and the PeerForward Playbook, each team executes three campaigns to drive actions research has shown are leading indicators of postsecondary success.

Track & Analyze Results

Teams set campaign goals, identify metrics, organize events and communications, track their school's progress using real-time data, and huddle regularly with their PeerForward Coach and school leaders to strategize to reach goals.

The Student-Driven Campaigns

- Apply to Three or More Colleges
- File Early for Financial Aid
- Connect Academics to Career and Community
- Essential Tools

Helping students in all grades build career acumen, connect to community opportunities and challenges, and make academic decisions with future aspirations in mind.

shift_ed

shift_ed is a local nonprofit based in Guilford County, North Carolina committed to providing access to support services designed to prepare students for success in college, career, and life.

GEOGRAPHY
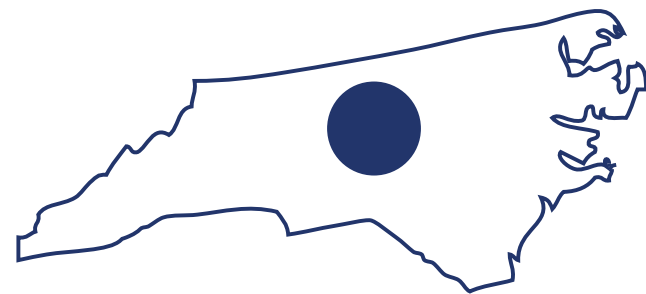
Guilford County, NC

SCALE

3,173
students

PRIORITY STUDENT POPULATIONS

16%
Hispanic

41%
Black

ESG

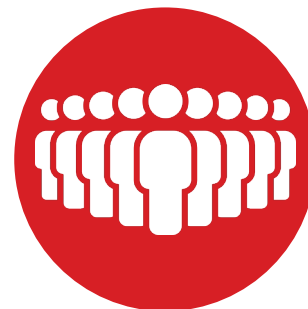Geared at increasing the number of students who had exposure to career pathways, shift_ed **administered the YouScience Career Aptitude Assessment to over 3,000 10th graders** in their local school district in Guilford County, North Carolina.

shift_ed then analyzed that assessment data and **convened industry professionals from some of the top aptitude-indicated career areas in Advanced Manufacturing, Finance, and Technology** to participate in in-person career fairs; and created a platform, "Your_Path," that makes exposure more accessible to all students.

Key Activities and Outcomes:
- Administered the YouScience Career Aptitude Assessment to over 3,000 students.
- Created a platform (Your_Path) that sought to expand knowledge and awareness of career pathways that students showed high aptitudes for but had limited exposure to prior to the career assessment administration.
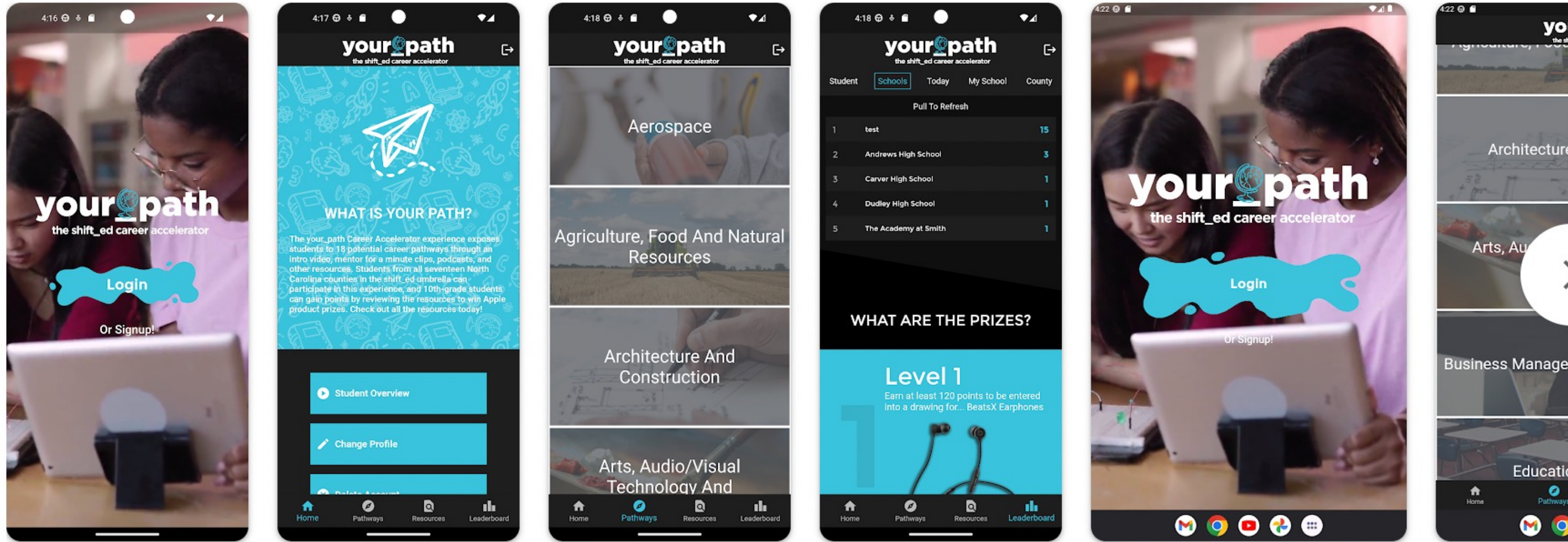
About this app →

your_path is a virtual career exploration experience for North Carolina middle and high school students. Students can identify careers and industries that they have the talent and interest for, hear from employees in those jobs and find out what it will take to achieve their goals - all from a computer or mobile device. This project is part of shift_ed's commitment to eliminating the opportunity gap for underrepresented students.

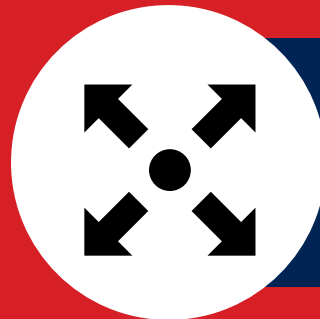Key Challenges to Scaling Pathways Navigation
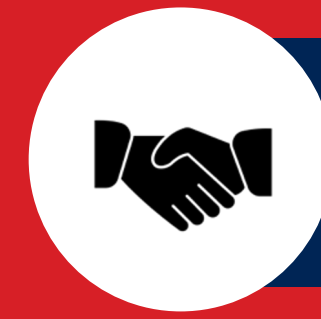
Key Challenges
to Scaling Navigation

Data

- Tracking Student Outcomes
- Local Labor Market Information

Capacity

- Staff Mindsets and Knowledge
- Resources and Tools

Partnerships

- Students
- Schools
- Inter-Organizational
- Employers and Industry

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Tracking Student Outcomes

While National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data can be used to verify college enrollment, there is no similar structure to track additional postsecondary pathways, such as certificate completion. Some organizations highlighted the use of student and advisor self-reported data, but recognize the limitations in relying solely on this data.

The field - led by state and federal policymakers and systems leaders - needs to create the appropriate infrastructure and incentives to make data on student progress through multiple postsecondary pathways available and accessible in a timely manner.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

OneGoal is working towards creating a database to analyze how many students that are enrolled at community colleges are specifically pursuing various career pathways and if they are persisting from year to year. **College Advising Corps** integrates data into its organization-wide data system, GRACE.

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Local Labor Market Information

Career pathway opportunities are context-specific. To ensure that we are advising students towards "good jobs" that exist within their communities, organizations need to leverage labor market information (LMI) to understand local workforce opportunities, define credentials of value, and begin to vet and curate quality providers.

While some organizations are well-positioned to use LMI data, many student support organizations, as well as national organizations that work across geographies, don't inherently have access to this data - or the skill set to analyze it. Having a vetted database to identify high-quality pathway options for multiple stakeholders to engage would be invaluable.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

OneGoal created a new role, Manager of Innovation and Pathways, to support regional pathways research, including vetting pathways programs and consulting with regional stakeholders on their career pathways efforts. **Austin Chamber of Commerce** provides monthly reports and ongoing trainings to district leaders on labor market trends.

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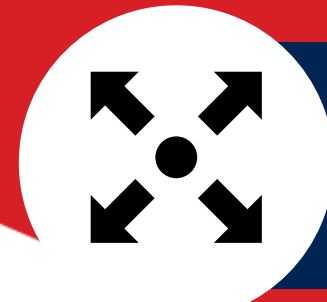
Staff Mindsets & Knowledge

Although significant strides are being made in expanding awareness of multiple pathways for students, many adults that formally or informally influence student decision making still perceive that pathways outside of four-year colleges are less rigorous and will likely not lead to an in-demand career with a family sustaining wage. And even when individuals are "bought in," they often lack the knowledge and skills to effectively guide students.

To address this, several organizations focused on training internal staff - and some even created new staff roles focused on pathways.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

College Advising Corps revised their organizational mission to focus on multiple postsecondary pathways beyond high school, with strong leadership buy-in. At the local level, the national team completed a "road show" to introduce their career and education pathways e-learning course to Program Directors; sites that participated had 100% or near 100% completion of the course.

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Resources & Tools

In addition to providing direct-to-student support through counseling and advising, being able to point students to strong resources is a helpful tool to add capacity and expand the reach of existing information to students looking for more support and guidance.

Highlighted in the cohort session at the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) conference, many of the participating organizations have robust student resources including that can be adapted to many contexts across the country.
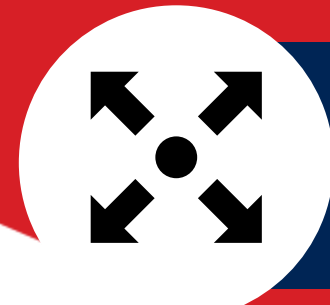
PILOT SPOTLIGHT

Get Schooled created a suite of online resources that can be utilized by students nationwide. These resources include 60 explainer videos of in-demand career pathways and insights from early career near-peers via short, personalized videos that are inclusive of multiple postsecondary pathways. including technical colleges, Associate's Degree, Bachelor Degree, and service programs.

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Students

All of the grantees for this project are "outside the system" actors, making direct collaboration with students or access to them through their home schools a critical ingredient for success.

Young people care about their futures, but may not always be inclined to seek out information on careers or multiple postsecondary pathways without external support and encouragement. They have many priorities and distractions, both in and out of school, and a multitude of online resources vying for their attention. They expect content to be engaging and relatable, informative and actionable, easy to access, and (ideally) brief. All of these make it challenging to get students' attention and sustained engagement.

Pilot organizations used a variety of approaches to address this challenge, including chatbots, texts, phone calls, social media, and online tools and platforms to reach students directly.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

Get Schooled's model is entirely online, leveraging texts, social media, and website resources to directly engage young people all across the country. For this pilot, Get Schooled developed videos featuring diverse professionals to help students see themselves in different jobs. Based on student feedback, they added more videos to frame industry context and new content on money management.

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Schools

Some organizations' pilots were nested squarely within schools, requiring them to work more actively with school-based actors and within school-based structures to interact with students.

Like students, schools have several priorities and distractions, especially in the long shadow of the pandemic. College and career readiness is secondary concern in many schools, with "traditional academics" at the center along with arts, sports, extracurricular activities, and increasingly, social-emotional learning. Leadership and personnel changes are the rule, rather than the exception. This can make it challenging for external organizations to get sufficient "real estate" – time, physical space, and mindshare – to deeply and consistently engage with students.

When schools and external organizations partner effectively, students can benefit from layered support, sustained attention, and alignment with existing school practices and messaging.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

Get2College developed and deployed career-focused curricular content for use in Mississippi's college and career readiness course, newly required for high school graduation statewide. **PeerForward** developed and piloted a for-credit CTE work-based learning course in Lansing, Michigan, in which high school students received training and served as peer advisors to other students.

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Inter-Organizational

Many public school districts have numerous external organizations who wish to support them around college and career readiness and postsecondary advising. This can lead organizations working in similar contexts – even, sometimes, in the very same schools.

Grantees participating in this initiative expressed a sense of competition among providers, noting that they didn't feel they were all working towards a common goal.

To ensure efficient and equitable allocation of resources, partners need to break down silos, foster collaboration, and align on supports.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

In Lansing School District (MI), district administrators saw a need for greater synergy among several nonprofit partners including **PeerForward**, **College Advising Corps**, CAPCAN, GEAR UP, and Michigan State. Starting in December 2022, the district and these organizations met on a monthly basis to align efforts. PeerForward and College Advising Corps created a joint written coordination plan.

Employers & Industry

It makes obvious sense to include employers and industry in efforts to help young people understand and navigate postsecondary pathways to thriving careers.

However, advising structures in school systems tend to privilege college – especially four-year college – with two-year colleges, short-term certificate programs, and direct entry points to the labor market getting short shrift. While most educators have experienced higher education first-hand, few have comparable experience and insight into the world of work outside of education. There can also be a disconnect between the developmental ethos and social justice orientation of public education and education nonprofits and the bottom-line imperatives of for-profit businesses.

Partnerships between districts, nonprofits, and the business community can help build common purpose, shared agendas, and improved experiences and outcomes for young people. Several grantees leveraged this opportunity to "lean in" and develop new relationships and capacity.

PILOT SPOTLIGHT

Austin Chamber of Commerce used its pilot to identify high school graduates with no college application on file and connect them with employers and training providers via its 512 Career Bridge online platform. It supplemented this with social media content and in-person opportunities to help students build awareness around in-demand postsecondary career pathways.

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Sustaining the Work

Sustaining the Work

As the organizations look to sustain and scale the work from their pilots, the four following themes emerged:

Expand Partnerships
Most organizations are considering partnerships to provide tailored content, technology solutions, career-aligned programming, LMI and career pathway expertise, etc.

Expand to Earlier Grades
Some organizations are looking to expand their pilots to earlier grades to create a continuum of advising supports to students, starting in middle school or earlier.
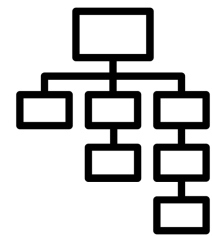
Expand Staff Capacity
Many organizations are looking to provide training on multiple pathways to internal staff, and some have created new roles to oversee this work.

Expand Audience
Some organizations are looking to build the advising capacity of other adults - including teachers, counselors, school administrators, and community partners.

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Recommendations
for the Field

For organizations looking to expand their current advising structures to incorporate multiple postsecondary pathways, consider the following lessons learned from the Pathways Access and Awareness pilots.
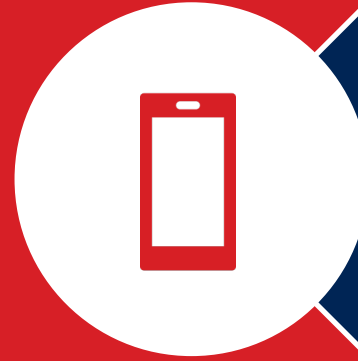
Employ technology (texting, chatbots, videos, social media, etc.) to meet students where they are, to disseminate messages at scale, and to open capacity for more individualized support to the students who need it most.

Directly engage students to support in the refinement of messaging to ensure the content resonates.
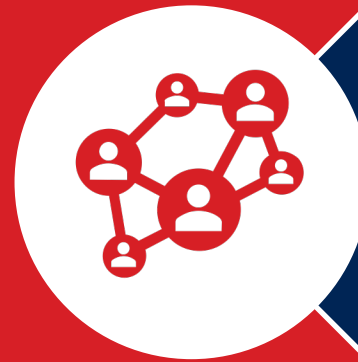
Broaden conceptualization of who serves as an advisor (peer, near-peer, educator, community partner, employers, etc.), and provide sufficient training and resources on multiple pathways to help shift mindsets and enable them to advise effectively.
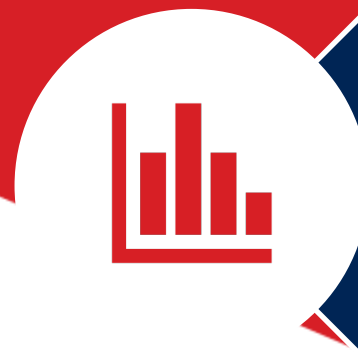
Collect and analyze data on local labor market opportunities and student outcomes in multiple postsecondary pathways to ensure advising students into high-quality programs.

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