



Research Summary: Post-Secondary Success

Phase One Research Findings

October 2018

The Challenge

In 2018, the Post-Secondary Success Collaborative Action Network (known as PSS CAN) enlisted TEGA to support and inform their work as they aim to hit their SMART target of enrolling approximately 100 youth into post-secondary programs by Spring of 2019 faster and more efficiently. The findings of this study are intended to help validate factors that the CAN previously identified as preventing students from attending a post-secondary program.

Over the summer months of 2018, TEGAs intercepted a total of 58 respondents. These respondents fell into one of three categories:

- **Intervention Youth** - Recent high school graduates (and their parents) who applied to a post-secondary program and continued into the program.
- **Opportunity Youth** – Recent high school graduates between the ages of 18 to 20 who have graduated high school within the past two years and either did not apply to any post-secondary programs
- **Summer Melt Youth** – Recent high school graduates (and their parents) who applied to a post-secondary program but did not enroll (this is termed summer melt).

This executive summary reviews the initial findings from this initial round of PSS research, provides recommendations for future interventions based on preliminary findings, and suggests focus areas for future research.

Phase One: Objectives

1. Evaluate the factors graduating seniors identify as causing summer melt.
2. Identify the implications for students who fell victim to summer melt, or never enrolled in a post-secondary program.

Phase One: Key Findings

The research validated three priority factors that the PSS CAN identified as barriers associated with summer melt: (1) Financial Aid and Literacy, (2) Systems of Support or the social and institutional structures that youth utilize and rely on for help with academia and beyond, and (3) Knowing and Going or the follow through and planning of next steps after high school. During analysis, the qualitative data revealed a fourth priority factor contributing to the decision to attend college: (4) Academic and Emotional Preparedness.

1. Financial Aid and Literacy

Financial aid and college affordability were by far the most significant challenges mentioned by target youth as well as their parents. These barriers pertain to both enrolling in college for opportunity youth and to remaining in college for enrolled youth.

“When I first applied, I didn’t get any financial aid and I knew that it was going to be difficult to ... pay for actual college. I knew my mom wasn’t going to be able to do it, I knew that the financial position that we were in at the time was just too difficult for us and I knew that she needed help in the business.” (Summer Melt Youth, Male, Age 23)

However, while financial aid was the biggest barrier, almost all enrolled youth spoke about ways they were preparing to mitigate this. Employment was the most common strategy for preparing for the next stage in their life. Jobs are seen as a way to become more independent, relieve the financial burden of their parents, or relieve the financial burden from themselves. While financing education is a concern for almost all youth and their parents, loan counseling was not as rarely cited as a step they had proactively taken.

Concerns regarding financing education include not having the know-how to complete applications for aid and not knowing how to learn about other financial resources available.

15%

of intervention youth identified completing loan counseling as a step they took in applying for post-secondary & only 1 of 10 parents

“I would really like help ... with is searching for scholarships, because she gets really good grades, and she has good writing skills, so she's able to write essays and fill out those applications. And as a middle class American, we don't qualify for financial aid. ... The other thing would be for her to find a mentor that would be able to help guide her, because I'm a business major, and she's in science. And I know very little bit -- little about science to help guide her and direct her.”(Intervention Parent, Hispanic Female, Age 58)

For opportunity youth, barriers to applying for college include not wanting to pay for it or not being able to afford the expense, not being sure of what they wanted to do, not needing college for their future goals, and not liking school. Due to the variety of barriers uncovered with this cohort, we will continue exploring this topic to better understand the implications and undertones of these barriers, and how financial concerns and financial literacy overlay with their other barriers.

2. Systems of Support

Youth, particularly first-generation attendees, recognize that their **usual ‘go-to’ support systems aren’t always capable of advising them** through the post-secondary process because it is outside their scope of experience.

Intervention Youth - Secondary knowledgeable persons who support enrolled youth play a significant role in helping navigate the system. It seems that these graduates turn to other individuals because, especially for first generation college students, parents lack the knowledge of how to navigate the college application process. Parents who did not go to college themselves, and particularly those who aren’t native English speakers, also expressed the importance of outside support systems.



While parents could not always provide navigational help, they offer critical personal and emotional support to students going through the process. Yet, parents play a varied role in motivation. Some students felt their parents encouraged college as a next step. Others drew inspiration to attend college from wanting to improve their family’s life or attributed their determination to observing the work ethic of their parents.

Many of the intervention youth mentioned their current advisors/counselors (e.g. Summer Bridge) as a support person useful for

understanding the enrollment process and their financial aid options. Less identified college advisors as ‘key’ sources of support. Intervention youth lean more heavily and more often on high school counselors and current intervention advisors than post-secondary sources like college advisors.

“The biggest contributor to what shaped where I’m at right now and what I want to do, I would say is the Project Lead the Way program at Westminster High School because it helped me explore different career paths and study biomedical science and it kind of helped me finalize my plans and made me sure of myself and what I want to do.”
(Intervention Youth, Hispanic Female, Age 18)

Opportunity Youth – Many expressed frustrations with the fragmented support structures post-high school. One explained that her main educational resource post-graduation is the library, but she couldn’t get help with college advising there because the library doesn’t offer that service. She also explained that she couldn’t go to her old high school counselor because she wasn’t enrolled there anymore.

And when it comes to graduating high school, opportunity youth receive support & motivation mostly from their family and their own personal drive to graduate. One opportunity youth cited his mom as a good support system for high school because her house rules pushed him to graduate. However, a number of opportunity youth said their peers did not offer support in pursuing post-secondary programs.

“I don’t really talk to my peers about school because nobody really cares.”
(Summer Melt, Black Male, Age 19)

And family support is not universal for high school graduates due to varying perceived values of college education within families and peer groups. One opportunity youth indicated that their family was disappointed that they were not going to college. And a few spoke about how college wasn’t ‘pushed’ in their families, indicating parents didn’t support one decision over another.

Overall, respondents who applied to programs and later enrolled described having a very broad base of support with both institutional navigation and emotional support. While those who didn’t apply lost all lines of connection to guidance.

3. Knowing and Going

Becoming independent was among the most mentioned goals on the ‘what’s next’ list as these youth become young adults and the biggest priority for most was ‘**going to college**’. However, current data indicates that navigating the transition from high school into young adulthood to college or life beyond is not broadly understood by families and graduates.

This is complicated by an education system that seems to be a “one path” system. Youth say they feel pressure to attend college because it is given as the only option for a next step to a successful life. As the exception, this youth understands the importance early on-the-ground experience and the path that presents if you know what you want and go for it.

“So, why I didn't apply to college is because I kind of already knew what I wanted to do after high school which is start my own business...I felt like learning from somebody who actually has a business and is hands on would help me out better because I feel like that would make it easier for me to learn.”(Opportunity Youth, Hispanic Male, Age 18)

However, more can be done to help this cohort understand college is not the only way. While some opportunity youth understand that college is not the only option, current findings show little awareness of other possibilities for skill development, training, and certifications outside of college.

Whereas some youth decided college was not in their future at all, others felt they just weren't ready to attend immediately after high school graduation but expressed the desire to do so in the future. One summer melt youth explained that there were many influencing factors for his decision to not attend, none of which were because he didn't see college as part of his future.

“In regard to family, we all want to go back to school, it's just a matter of doing it in our own time. My mom, she's already in school. She's turning 45 and she's still in school. Every day she's learning. My sister and I, we have the conversation more frequently and we both know that we'll be attending school, just life gets in the way. ... I know that I will go back to school.”(Summer Melt Youth, Hispanic Male, Age 23)

4. Academic and Emotional Preparedness

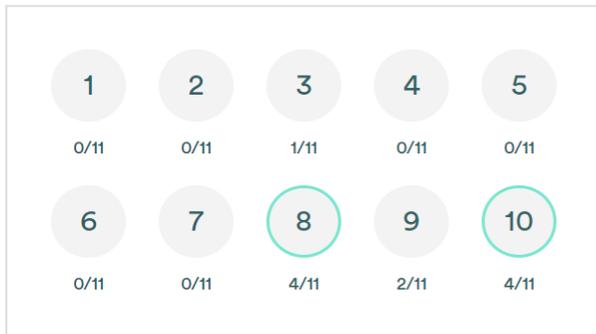
Compounding the unfamiliarity with the transition between high school and life beyond, we found many youth felt they were poorly prepared for life after high school graduation. **College readiness, both academic and emotional**, is an important issue that needs to be addressed.

Almost all intervention youth in this sample had completed all of the steps to enroll in a post-secondary program. When asked about the emotional challenges they anticipated before enrolling in college, their most frequent answers were feeling overwhelmed, not being able to afford to go and not knowing what to do. These sentiments sound similar to those of opportunity and summer melt youth who also listed being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do as barriers to enrolling in a post-secondary program.

Both opportunity youth and intervention youth cited “not feeling ready” academically and emotionally, to prepare for the next stage of life; it appears to be a significant hurdle.

“So, the support that I would like would just be teachers and advisers because professors don't really help out as much, but you can still always go talk to them... high school, if you talked to your teachers to be more involved with you and just learn... There's teammates and classmates that would just help you out ... just to be on top of everything.” (Intervention, Hispanic White Male, Age 18)

On a scale of 1-10, how likely are you to complete a post-secondary program in the future? 10 is very likely and 1 is not very likely at all. (Opportunity Youth)



Opportunity youth value additional education despite not taking the steps to apply or enroll. For the majority of these youth, they hoped to enroll in a professional program of some kind such as EMT, real estate or mechanical classes, versus 4-year universities.

It should be noted that a few of these youth sounded like they were interested in these programs because of a lack of awareness of other viable options.

Current Opportunities for Action

The TEGA research team and the PSS CAN identified the following opportunities for further interventions based on the findings presented here. These recommendations should be used to identify strategies that can be implemented immediately.



Next Steps

The vital next step is to consider what actions the PSS CAN can take using this research to reach their SMART target by Spring of 2019.

While this research provided a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex pathway to post-secondary success, more can be done to uncover the experiences and values of summer melt and opportunity youth specifically. We still have not reached saturation in our sample, meaning we are still discovering new information on ‘summer melt’ and have identified areas for further research, specifically with opportunity youth.

When considering future rounds of research with all target PSS youth, here are some considerations for topics to cover:

- 1 Understand the difference, demographically and in overall outcomes, between a student who decides to take out loans and enroll into a PSS program vs. a student who doesn’t take out loans and that is their barrier to enrollment
- 2 Take a deeper look into the notion of “feeling ready”. What does it mean to “not feel ready”? At what point do respondents identify they’re ready? Is it a checklist or just a gut feeling?
- 3 How do youth picture the “career ladder”? Are they aware of how entry in to various fields or organizations work, with or without a degree? Do they feel prepared for the softer skills of job hunting and performance?
- 4 How are those youth who received intervention doing in college? Do they feel that the intervention prepared them for their first semester of college? How likely are they to remain enrolled?