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Pivots Without Pathways:

Career Navigation in a Fragmented Labor Market

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About the Project on Workforce

The Project on Workforce is an interdisciplinary, collaborative project between the Harvard Kennedy School's Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, the Harvard Business School Managing the Future of Work Project, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Project produces and catalyzes basic and applied research at the intersection of education and labor markets for leaders in business, education, and policy. The Project's research aims to help shape a postsecondary system of the future that creates more and better pathways to economic mobility and forges smoother transitions between education and careers. Learn more at www.pw.hks.harvard.edu.

Executive Summary

Career Navigation in an Evolving Labor Market

Economic mobility in the United States increasingly depends not just on skills or credentials, but on individuals' ability to navigate a fragmented and volatile labor market. Career trajectories are becoming less linear as workers change jobs more frequently and re-enter education at multiple points in their lives.[1,2] At the same time, automation and generative AI are reshaping work, accelerating changes in job requirements and prompting more frequent, complex decisions under conditions of uncertainty.[3,4] **Careers are increasingly defined by pivots, yet the systems that support mobility have not kept pace.**

Our education and workforce systems remain oriented toward a more stable, linear labor market, rather than continuous navigation. They often fail to provide individuals with the resources they need to navigate shifting opportunities—including access to labor market information, social networks, economic stability, navigation skills, and career guidance. As a result, those resources remain unevenly distributed.

Drawing on a two-year mixed-methods study—including a nationally representative survey of 1,009 low-wage workers and 264 community college students and 74 interviews and focus groups with workers, students, and career coaches—this paper examines how individuals gather and interpret career information, respond to disruption, build skills, and pursue career advancement. When navigation supports are weak or inaccessible, workers and learners with the least margin for error bear the greatest risk of economic stagnation. **Our findings suggest that disparities in career navigation resources constrain individuals' ability to access economic opportunity and investments to support effective career navigation should be assessed as a public good.**

Key Findings

Careers are shaped by pivots, not pathways.

The low-wage workers and community college students in our study experienced careers marked by repeated pivots, often in response to external shocks. Participants described multiple career switches, exits, and re-entries across both education and employment, often driven by layoffs, shifting caregiving responsibilities, health challenges, immigration, academic misalignment, or the vagaries of the business cycle.

While some transitions advanced long-term goals, nearly half of participants' career moves were lateral or reactive. As a result, career progression is not linear, and mobility increasingly depends on individuals' ability to navigate repeated transitions under constraint. Outcomes were shaped by structural conditions: access to reliable information, the depth and diversity of social networks, stable employment, and coaching support. In their absence, learners and workers experienced false starts and perpetual cycles of low-wage work, even when motivated to advance.

Information is abundant but unreliable–and difficult to interpret.

Online platforms have expanded access to career information, but without a corresponding improvement in information clarity. Participants consistently reported encountering misleading or opaque job postings and automated systems that generate minimal feedback, leading to strong mistrust of online information. The challenge is not access to information alone, but the ability to interpret and act on it. In many cases, institutions fail to translate labor market signals into actionable guidance.

While most workers and students expressed confidence in their understanding of their "ideal career," far fewer could name specific employers in those fields in our survey. Without trusted intermediaries, like well-informed career counselors or employment specialists, to interpret labor market signals, individuals must

reconcile conflicting or incomplete information on their own, complicating decision-making. Generative AI tools show potential to synthesize and personalize information, but uneven digital literacy and limited quality controls risk amplifying existing inequalities.

Social capital shapes access to opportunity.

Family and friends are the most common sources of career information. Those networks provide emotional support and encouragement, but frequently lead to jobs within a limited set of industries, often reinforcing occupational clustering in low-wage jobs. At the same time, opaque hiring systems and automated screening tools create additional barriers, limiting who is considered for roles.

Connections that cross sectors and income levels are less common, especially among low-wage workers, but remain pivotal. Participants who developed relationships with professors, supervisors, or hiring managers often described those connections as critical in accessing new roles. In an AI-mediated hiring environment, referrals and internal endorsements often determine who advances to interviews. Social networks, therefore, function as both support systems and gatekeeping structures.

Job quality enables–or constrains–the capacity to navigate.

Wages, schedules and commutes directly influenced participants' ability to engage in career navigation activities. When income is insufficient or hours are unpredictable, individuals prioritize immediate stability over advancement.

A living wage functions as a threshold condition, without which participants report limited time and cognitive space for reflection, job search, or training. Once basic needs are met, advancement opportunities, workplace environment, and supervisor support–all conditions that enable effective career navigation–become key drivers of job preference.

Amid labor market uncertainty, churn, and limited mobility, some participants identified entrepreneurship as a path to improved job quality and agency, though access to that career path is less clear.

Navigation skills are critical but developed through trial and error.

Surveys and interviews indicate high worker self-confidence in durable skills, particularly social skills, and navigation skills. Those competencies—self-advocacy, persistence, strategic job search, and networking—are typically developed through experience rather than formal instruction.

As careers become more dynamic and transition-heavy, durable and navigation skills become more important to achieving economic security. Workers must continually assess and adapt to the evolving workplace, but structured opportunities to build such capacities are largely absent from education and training programs.

Career guidance is essential but under-resourced.

Career coaches play a critical role in helping workers and learners interpret information, identify and access opportunities, and maintain momentum during transitions. Yet, access to coaching services remains limited.

The coaches we interviewed described significant constraints: high caseloads, little formal training, unclear job descriptions, and lack of digital tools and resources. They are expected to be knowledgeable about evolving technologies and skills demands, often without the labor market data or training they need to track and interpret trends. In practice, many provide support far beyond career advising, including helping clients access housing, childcare and health coverage.

Policy and Practice Implications

Together, findings suggest that career mobility is shaped by access to a set of interdependent resources that support career navigation over time. Strengthening career navigation infrastructure across education, workforce, and employment systems is a societal imperative. Based on our findings, we identify six recommendations:

1. **Strengthen information infrastructure.** Career information should be curated, transparent, and embedded within trusted institutions. Generative

AI tools show promise but require safeguards to prevent bias and ensure accuracy.

2. **Cultivate mechanisms to broaden social networks.** Education and workforce strategies should intentionally build cross-income and cross-sector connections through work-based learning, structured mentoring, and place-based initiatives.
3. **Improve job quality to enable advancement.** Basic elements of a job—including adequate wages, predictable schedules, and reasonable commutes—are prerequisites for enabling active career navigation. Employers should clarify advancement pathways and strengthen managerial support.
4. **Build navigation skills for a volatile labor market.** Skills such as decision-making, adaptability, and resilience should be embedded as core competencies across education and training systems. Institutions should support guided reflection, career mapping, and coached decision-making.
5. **Invest in career coaching across the education-to-work continuum.** Career coaching should be funded, structured, and integrated as essential infrastructure. Coaches must have manageable caseloads, access to digital tools and labor market information, and professionalized pathways.
6. **Align education and workforce systems around mobility.** Greater coordination–rather than isolated interventions–is needed to support long-term mobility. Public and private actors should align incentives, invest in intermediaries, modernize data systems, and strengthen the social safety net to enable long-term advancement.

The Road Ahead

Career navigation is the ongoing process of acquiring information, making decisions, and taking action in pursuit of career goals. As labor markets become more dynamic and less predictable and AI continues to disrupt careers, this capability increasingly determines who progresses and who stalls.

Policymakers, educators, employers, and intermediaries must coordinate to build navigation infrastructure that provides equitable access to reliable information, professional networks, economic stability, navigation skills, and institutional guidance. Without it, workers and learners will continue to shoulder the risk of stagnation and enjoy fewer opportunities to advance.

Introduction

Career decisions play an important role in shaping economic mobility.[5,6] Over the course of a career, individuals must decide whether to pursue additional education, remain in a job, change employers, or enter a new field. Those choices compound over time, shaping earnings, stability, and long-term trajectories.

Increasingly, such decisions are made in a labor market defined less by pathways and more by repeated transitions. Many decisions are made in response to short term exigencies with little visibility into long-term implications. Workers and learners must interpret incomplete information, balance financial constraints, and respond to evolving labor market conditions—and the consequences of missteps fall hardest on those who can least afford them. What may appear as individual success or stagnation often reflects differences in access to career navigation infrastructure.

Building on career development research,[7,8,9] we frame decision-making as part of a process of career navigation, defined in our 2023 paper, *Unlocking Economic Prosperity: Career Navigation in a Time of Rapid Change*, as the ongoing work of acquiring information, making personally-relevant plans, and taking action across education, training, and work to move toward one's career goals.[10] Navigation is not a single moment of choice, but a continuous process that unfolds across the lifetime.

The importance of career navigation has grown as the structure of work has changed. Careers are less likely to follow predictable occupational ladders, and job transitions are becoming more frequent over longer working lives. Gig and contract work have expanded, offering greater flexibility, but often without clear advancement opportunities. At the same time, rapid technological change and the widespread adoption of generative AI have contributed to the shortening half-life of technical skills, reshaping the demand for labor.[11] It is likely that a growing share of the workforce will need to acquire new skills and make repeated career transitions in the coming years.[12,13]

In this environment, mobility increasingly depends not just on the skills and credentials individuals possess, but also on their capacity to navigate an evolving labor market. Effective navigation requires interpreting labor market signals, identifying promising opportunities, and adapting to unexpected disruptions. At the same time, many of the institutions designed to support career mobility remain oriented toward more stable and linear career trajectories. As a result, the resources that support such activities—such as reliable information, expansive social networks, documented work histories, institutional guidance, and stable employment conditions—are unevenly distributed. We refer to the systems that provide those resources as career navigation infrastructure. While prior research has examined those factors independently, this paper focuses on how they interact to shape low-wage workers' and community college students' capacity to devise and execute plans under uncertainty.

Access to career navigation resources is uneven. When one or more components are partially or altogether inaccessible, individuals face higher risk of misaligned training decisions, stalled mobility, and repeated cycles of low-wage work. Such consequences are particularly visible among low-wage workers and community college students, the populations examined in this study. Both groups often navigate within structural conditions that narrow their options from the outset. Financial precarity limits their ability to pursue retraining, relocation, or absorb short spells of unemployment. Discrimination and unequal access to professional networks constrain exposure to higher wage roles, contributing to occupational segregation and significant wage gaps by race and gender.[14,15] At the same time, hiring systems add another layer of exclusion– automated screening systems and rigid credential requirements can exclude large swaths of qualified candidates before their applications are meaningfully considered.[16]

This paper examines how low-wage workers and learners navigate those conditions in practice. Drawing on a two-year mixed-methods study—including a nationally representative survey of low-wage workers and community college students, as well as interviews and focus groups with workers, students, and career coaches—we analyze how individuals gather information, build networks, develop skills, and make decisions about education and employment. It builds on our first paper in 2025, *Navigating Opportunity: Career Information and Mobility in Low Wage Employment*, augmenting

initial survey analysis with qualitative data from focus groups and interviews. By integrating qualitative insights, we shed a more nuanced light on the decisions workers make, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they use when resources miss the mark.

Our findings suggest that economic mobility is not just shaped by individual skills or aspirations, but by the conditions under which career decisions are made and executed. That is, career mobility is a system-level outcome determined by access to career navigation resources. This paper examines those resources, identifies where systems fall short, and outlines how they can be strengthened.

Methodology

This paper draws on a two-year mixed methods study examining how low-wage workers and community college students acquire and use career information as they navigate education and employment. In fall 2024, we conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,009 low-wage workers and 264 current community college students. Survey questions focused on key aspects of career navigation, including information sources, social networks, skills, employment conditions, and career aspirations. Findings from the survey informed a short paper released in spring 2025 and helped shape the qualitative research design for the study. Survey results were used to both contextualize qualitative findings and inform the thematic organization of the analysis.

Between July and November 2025, the research team conducted eight focus groups and a series of semi-structured interviews with low-wage workers, community college students, and career coaches. Participation was voluntary, and the sample may reflect a degree of self-selection, particularly among individuals who are more engaged in career services or motivated to discuss their experiences. In total, we engaged 74 participants across the qualitative activities.

To be eligible to participate, members of the low-wage worker population had to be currently employed and earning less than $40,000 annually, while students had to be currently enrolled in a community college. We conducted four focus groups with workers and four with community college students. During focus groups, participants completed a career mapping exercise documenting key transitions across their education and employment histories.

Figure 1: **Demographic Characteristics of Participants (Qualitative Sample)**

	Student (n=32)		Worker (n=29)	
	n	%	n	%
Age				
18-24	19	59.4%	3	10.3%
25-34	8	25.0%	15	51.7%
35-44	3	9.4%	4	13.8%
45-54	1	3.1%	3	10.3%
55-64	0	0.0%	4	13.8%
N/A	1	3.1%	0	0.0%
Race				
Asian or Pacific Islander	5	15.6%	2	7.4%
Black or African American	7	21.9%	11	40.7%
Hispanic	10	31.3%	3	11.1%
Other	3	9.4%	4	14.8%
White	7	21.9%	7	25.9%
Gender				
Man	12	37.5%	9	33.3%
Woman	20	62.5%	18	66.7%

Focus groups were supplemented with individual interviews. Some interviews were conducted as follow-ups with focus group participants, while others were conducted with newly recruited participants. Interviews allowed for more flexible scheduling and provided opportunities for deeper discussion of participants' career journeys and decision-making processes. Some interviews were conducted in Spanish to reach a wider group of participants.

All team members participated in a deductive coding process. Interview and focus group transcripts were reviewed line by line and coded using an initial set of a priori codes reflecting the study's central themes. Transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti (web version) and all interviews were deidentified to reduce bias in the analysis. In addition, career maps collected during focus groups were analyzed to support triangulation. Career maps were systematically coded by segmenting each career move and classifying that transition based on its alignment with the participant's stated ideal career (see Part I for additional detail).

At least two researchers independently coded each transcript, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. Throughout the process, the team reflected on its own career journeys and positionality, acknowledging that members benefited from middle-income backgrounds and elite educational opportunities. The team worked to remain attentive to perspectives that challenged initial assumptions and regularly revisited the focus group protocol, revising questions when participants' responses suggested alternative interpretations. Interviews with career coaches were conducted to triangulate findings from workers and students and provide additional insight into how navigation challenges appear from an advising perspective. Discussions focused on coaches' career backgrounds, coaching activities and approaches, perspectives on clients, and measures of success.

The research team sought to understand how individuals interpret their career journeys, rather than imposing their own fixed ideas or attitudes on the trajectories. Participant reflections ranged from positive to negative, but most conveyed a neutral recognition of the constraints and opportunities shaping their paths. The research team approached these narratives with the goal of understanding how individuals interpret and respond to those conditions rather than evaluating the decisions themselves. Quotations have been edited lightly for grammar and clarity, while preserving meaning.

Part I

Pivoting in a Volatile Labor Market

The career trajectories of low-wage workers and learners in our study rarely resembled the steady progression implied by traditional career pathways. Instead, participants described careers marked by repeated pivots—shifts between jobs, industries, or educational programs that occurred in response to changing circumstances. Such transitions often included switching occupations, exiting the labor market, and re-entering education or training at different points in their lives. Many moves were lateral–failing to advance individuals toward their ideal careers. Only one participant reported a strictly forward moving career trajectory. This individual was a nurse who pursued midwifery–consistent with our survey findings that healthcare occupations may provide more clearly defined career pathways.[17]

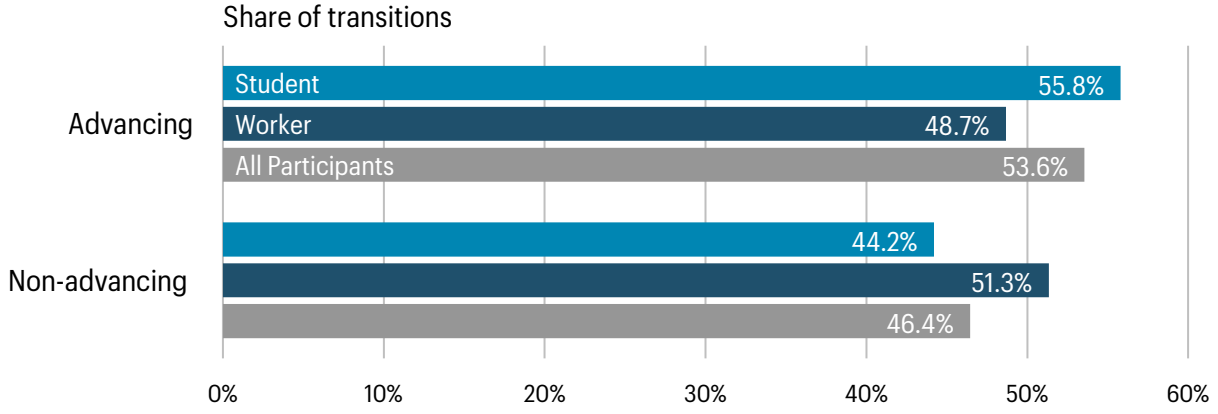
Low-wage workers' and community college students' careers were shaped by external shocks such as layoffs, changing caregiving responsibilities, health challenges, immigration, and shifts in industry demand, requiring them to reassess their plans and make new decisions about education, employment, or training. Rather than following a preordained course, participants experienced careers punctuated by periods of experimentation, adjustment, and redirection. In this environment, navigation becomes an ongoing process of interpreting labor market signals, evaluating options, and responding to disruptions.

Career pivots are common–and career movement is often lateral.

Participants frequently shared long-term career plans and goals, but the reflective nature of the study revealed how participants' actual career steps diverged from their plans. In our survey, 48% of low-wage workers identified an "ideal career" they were pursuing, and nearly 80% reported that they are on a path towards that goal. Yet, only half reported that their current job moved them in that direction. Students were more optimistic, with 72% naming an ideal career and 91% reported being on a path towards that goal. However, external events, institutional barriers, and personal circumstances—or a combination of those factors–often forced participants to pivot, often by switching careers or fields.

To understand participants' career trajectories, we analyzed interview and focus group transcripts alongside career maps created during focus groups. The career map analysis focused on the directionality of career transitions–specifically, whether participants' actions moved them toward their stated ideal careers. We coded 30 unique career maps (18 from students and 12 from low-wage workers)[18] and found that just over

Figure 2: **Transition Directionality (Career Maps)**



half (53%) of transitions advanced participants toward their goals (see fig. 2).[19]

Advancing transitions included actions such as earning a certificate or taking a job in a desired field. The remainder of transitions–coded as non-advancing–represented lateral or backward movement, relative to participants' goals, such as gig work (e.g., driving for Uber), geographic relocation, or layoffs. Community college students reported a higher share of advancing transitions than low-wage workers; among the latter, only 49% of career moves were advancing.

We grounded the mapping exercise in our conceptual definition of a career: "more than just a job; it encompasses your long-term professional journey, including the roles you take on, the skills you develop, and the goals you achieve over time" (see Appendix 2), and provided written instructions to guide participants (see Appendix 4). Because the exercise is inherently subjective, the events included in career maps vary in scope and type–for example, one individual identified attending a career fair as a noteworthy event, while another chose to include only formal credentials. Taken together with interview and focus group data, it provides a useful triangulation of participants' career trajectories, while revealing how participants conceptualize their careers.

We also examined the interview and focus group transcripts to understand participants' career moves, specifically the pivots they made throughout their careers, which we classified as (1) switches, when individuals moved between jobs or industries; (2) exits, when individuals left an education program or the labor market altogether; and (3) re-entries, when individuals returned to education or the workforce after a prior exit (see fig. 3). Such events often occurred in response to circumstances outside the individual's control, such as the pandemic or a union strike, highlighting the structural forces shaping career trajectories for low-income learners and workers.

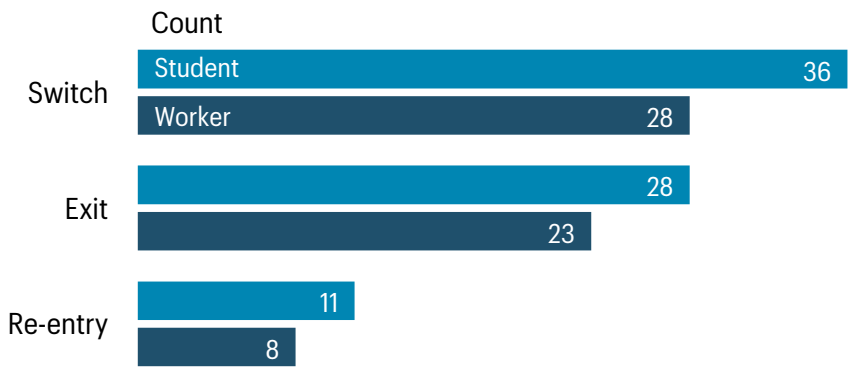
On average, students described more pivots than workers in interviews, focus groups, and career maps constructed during focus groups (see Appendix 4 for example template). While students were generally younger, the larger number of pivots often reflected early-career exploration, where field shifts are more common and expected. Workers' pivots, by contrast, were more likely to indicate encounters with structural constraints, as opposed to experimentation.

Participants themselves were cognizant of this nonlinearity. Rather than describing their careers as steady movement from aspiration to attainment, many described them as a series of adjustments, pauses, reversals, and responses to uncertainty. One community college student, returning to school after taking several years off for personal reasons, explained:

> *"I don't believe in the track anymore. I believe I'm a pivoter. My life has... so many things that have been chosen for me... I just pivot now... I just care about taking in whatever I can, and making the most of it while it's happening, and that's something I had to unlearn."*

For some participants, success depended less on following a predetermined pathway and more on the ability to adapt to changing conditions. Community college students often spoke about plans to pursue higher education beyond community college, with the

Figure 3: **Frequency of Pivots (Qualitative Sample)**



majority hoping to transfer to a four-year institution—a trend consistent with the national community college student population.[20] Worker participants were less likely to discuss further education, but equally likely to have long-term career ambitions.

Career Shocks

Many of the pivots described by participants were triggered by career shocks–disruptive or otherwise extraordinary events that are caused by factors outside an individual's control and prompt reflection about one's career.[21] Such shocks often forced individuals to reconsider their plans or pursue new opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented one such shock, disrupting both education and employment. The abrupt shift to remote learning left many community college students, who are overwhelmingly from lower-income households, without technological and economic resources to continue their education.[22] Community college enrollment dropped precipitously during thep andemic, with the largest reduction among Black and Latinx students.[23] As of Fall 2023, only 27% of community colleges had recovered from pre-pandemic levels.[24]

The labor market also experienced widespread disruption. Businesses, especially in the hospitality and leisure sectors, shuttered. Low-wage and low-hour workers were hit the hardest, laid off en masse,[25] especially young adults without a college degree.[26] The pandemic shock compounded other economic and technological trends, such as AI adoption, weakened labor power, and wage stagnation, creating conditions where mass layoffs are more likely and easy to justify. For many workers, job loss triggered decisions to return to school or pursue new career paths. In fact, community college enrollments tend to increase during labor market downturns, with several studies documenting the growth in workforce programs.[27,28,29]

One 29-year old participant described leaving the entertainment industry after the writer strike eliminated work in Los Angeles:

> *"I was actually in the entertainment industry for a while, and after the writer's strike I had a really hard time finding work, so I decided to go back to school, and I've been looking to find a job that pays a living wage, but it's been pretty difficult."*

Such experiences illustrate how shocks can force individuals to reconsider their trajectory, often with limited information about alternative pathways. In 2024, Tyler Woods and colleagues demonstrated that the type of local labor market and mobility pathway (e.g. changing employer, changing sector, or both) are critical determinants of whether workers can reach higher-quality employment.[30] Even in the best-case scenario—during the strongest labor market conditions–mobility to a good job was limited to 8% of those who began in lower quality roles.

Life-Changing Events

Not all pivots were triggered by external shocks. Participants also described personal life-changing events that reshaped their careers, like having a child or moving to another state.

Health Challenges

Participants identified disabilities or chronic health conditions that constrained their career opportunities and development. In some cases, health issues required participants to leave certain jobs for alternative roles. For example, one 25-year old participant spent several years working in fast food services until a car accident caused significant nerve damage. As she explained, "I couldn't function at work." She subsequently began searching for remote jobs that would accommodate her.

Mental health emerged as a key factor shaping the types of job opportunities individuals pursue. Both workers and learners emphasized the importance of workplaces and managers who recognize and respond to their mental health needs, past trauma, and stressors. One student, majoring in information technology, described challenges navigating his anxiety disorder in the workplace. He mentioned a specific instance where his manager responded supportively to an anxiety attack, helping him regain trust: "they could understand my weaknesses and strengths." Instead of feeling dismissed, this individual showed how responsive management can foster psychological safety, build stronger workplace relationships, and improve job satisfaction.

Immigration

Immigration also emerged as a significant turning point in several participants' careers. While immigrants' experiences are diverse, a few throughlines emerged.

Many participants described arriving in the United States with years of professional experience or advanced credentials from their home country that were not recognized by domestic employers. Research shows that more than two million college-educated immigrants in the US are often unemployed or underemployed[31]—and race and ethnicity, place of education, English proficiency, and legal status all impact employment. Many highly-skilled immigrants face a major decision: attempt to validate and translate their previous career path in the US or restart by pursuing a new credential.

Participants in our study described those experiences, often starting over in new fields despite prior professional success. One 24-year old woman worked at a Michelin-star restaurant in El Salvador as a professional pastry chef, but had to take a lower-skilled position in the US because her credentials were not recognized. Another participant worked as a registered nurse in Nepal, but upon arrival in the US, realized she needed to start "from zero" and returned to community college.

One worker who had been a supervisor in the Dominican Republic described the psychological toll of this transition:

> *"Yo sentía que había sido un cambio súper exageradamente, porque de primera, de yo ser jefa, me entiende, a ir a limpiar, es como que muy difícil" [I felt the change was extreme—going from being a boss to going to clean is very difficult].*

This account underscores the feeling of overwhelm, and perhaps trauma, associated with immigration to the United States.

Outside of credentials, participants mentioned a myriad of other challenges, from English language proficiency to a lack of connections and information about the labor market. Participants discussed enrolling in ESL classes to gain proficiency, but in some instances, faced decreased self-efficacy and confidence. Compounded systemic barriers left many individuals with limited opportunities, forcing them to take low-paying jobs.

College Stop-Outs

Stopping out of college represents another common pivot in participants' education and career trajectories. Community colleges serve both as a major entry point into higher education and a site subject to frequent interruption. Nationally, nearly 40% of students at public two-year colleges leave without completing a credential.[32] Many later return to education, often after periods in the labor market.

Nearly half of participants (47%) in our qualitative sample had previously enrolled in college before their current program–almost all without completing a degree. These interruptions were rarely the result of a single factor. Instead, students described a combination of financial pressures, changing career goals, family responsibilities, and institutional barriers that led them to pause their education.

Some participants explained that their initial field of study did not align with their interests or long-term goals. One student described leaving a finance program after realizing the field did not sustain their motivation: "I only did it because I knew finance made money, but I had no actual interest in finance, so I found myself losing focus and just motivation in class."

This account illustrates a broader challenge in career navigation. Labor market information—such as earnings potential—can influence initial decisions about fields of study, but it may not be sufficient to sustain persistence when students lack deeper exposure to the day-to-day realities of the occupation.

Changing a major can be costly, requiring students to weigh time, credit, and tuition dollars.[33] A few students we interviewed described needing to wait multiple semesters to enter new programs or repeating coursework when switching fields. Such delays extend the time required to complete credentials and increase financial risk. Rather than reflecting disengagement from education entirely, some interruptions reflect attempts to realign educational pathways with evolving career goals, but such stop-outs can delay progress toward stable employment.

Limited Opportunities for Reflection

Participants noted that opportunities for structured reflection about career decisions were rare. The focus groups and interviews themselves were often the first time individuals had been asked to reflect on their career journeys in detail. Self-reflection is a critical exercise in career construction and development,[34] but too many low-wage workers and community college students lack the time or cognitive space to do so.

In the survey, only half of low-wage workers reported having enough time to consider alternative career

options. Similarly, one 23-year old participant described this realization during the career mapping exercise:

> *"This exercise... really made me realize that I don't do very much long-term reflection. Like ever."*

Another participant explained that the pressures of meeting basic needs often left little time for long-term planning or career reflection. "I was trying to make it to the next day." For many individuals, career navigation is driven by immediate needs rather than deliberate, long-term planning.

Implications

Such accounts illustrate how career trajectories increasingly involve repeated pivots triggered by economic shocks, institutional barriers, and personal circumstances. Rather than following linear pathways, workers and learners must repeatedly reassess their options and adapt to changing conditions.

Such dynamics place a growing premium on career navigation capacity, as workers and learners must repeatedly interpret uncertainty and adapt their decisions in ways that shape mobility. As the following sections show, that capacity depends heavily on access to reliable information, social networks, stable employment conditions, and institutional guidance.

Part II

The Conditions that Enable Career Navigation

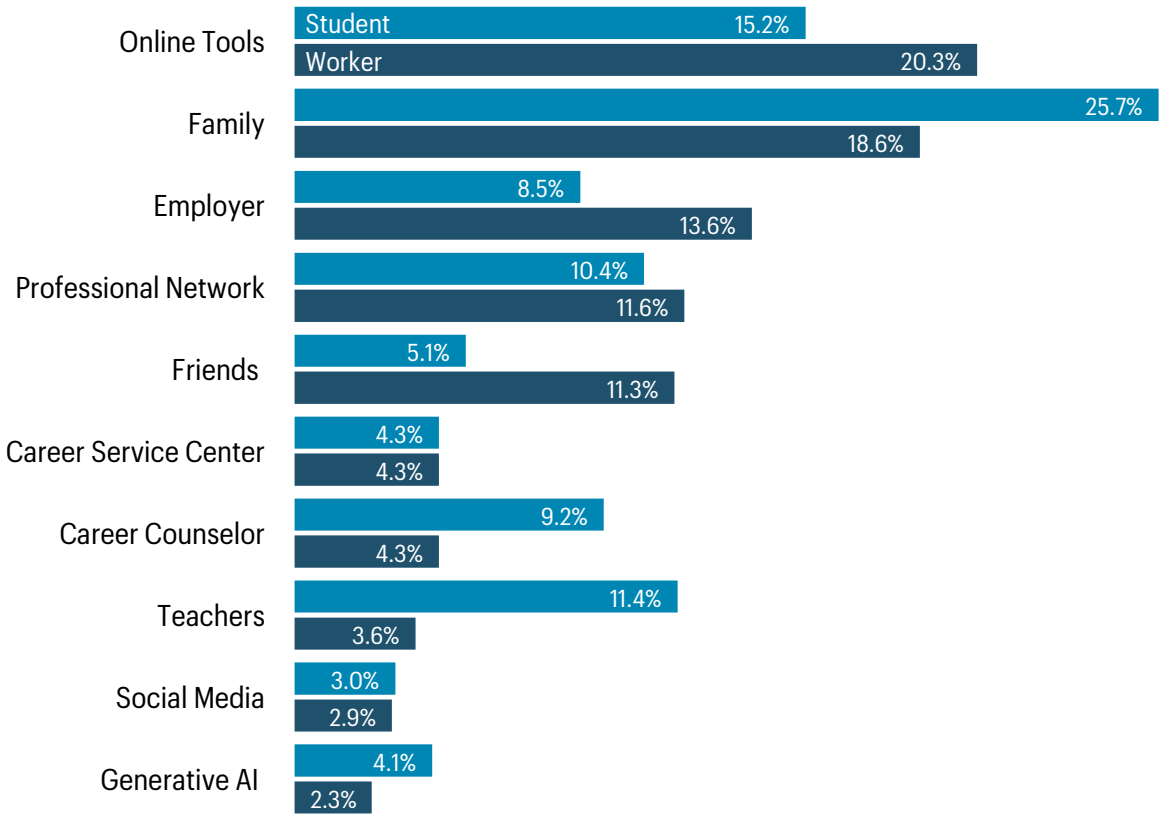
The previous section illustrates how careers unfold through repeated pivots rather than predictable pathways. Low-wage workers and community college students must continually interpret labor market signals, evaluate opportunities, and respond to disruptions that reshape their trajectories. Yet the ability to make such decisions effectively does not depend solely on individual motivation or persistence. Instead, it is shaped by access to a set of resources that enable (or constrain) career navigation.

Drawing on both survey and qualitative findings, the following sections examine five factors that consistently shaped participants' ability to navigate their careers: access to reliable information, social capital, job stability, navigation skills, and institutional support, such as career coaching. The components do not operate independently; they interact in ways that can either reinforce or compensate for one another, shaping individuals' overall capacity to navigate. Together, they enable individuals to interpret opportunities, recover from setbacks, and pursue advancement in a volatile labor market.

Information

Access to reliable labor market information—and the ability to interpret it—is a foundational component of career navigation.[35] Workers and learners must interpret signals about occupations, wages, skills, and hiring practices in order to make decisions about education, training, and employment.[36,37] Yet participants consistently described an environment characterized by information abundance without clarity. Digital job platforms, social media, and online forums provide large volumes

Figure 4: **Primary Source of Career Information**



of information, but participants often struggled to determine which sources were trustworthy or relevant. As one worker put it, the digital labor market is "kind of a jungle"—incredibly dense and difficult to navigate.

Without trusted intermediaries to interpret labor market signals, individuals must make important career decisions using fragmented or contradictory information. The sections below examine several dimensions of that challenge, including the reliability of online job platforms, the role of media and social networks in shaping career expectations, the impact of automated hiring systems, and the gaps that remain when education institutions are unable to translate labor market signals into clear guidance.

Online Information is Unreliable

Online job boards and digital search tools are widely available but not widely trusted. Our survey revealed that one in five workers rely on online tools as their go-to source for career information. A smaller share of students identified online tools as their primary information source (15%); instead, they were more likely to turn to family members (26%) (see fig. 4).

Participants discussed an environment where opportunities seem abundant but difficult to verify, describing online job searches as "confusing," "frustrating," and "difficult." In their estimation, major job platforms were saturated with misleading postings, scams, and "ghost jobs"—positions that remain posted even though employers are no longer hiring. In fact, one community college student explained that he abandoned Indeed and LinkedIn altogether:

> *"I stopped because I just feel as though it's a bunch of ghost jobs and scams on their website."*

Such skepticism was not limited to students. A career coach cautioned students about "phantom jobs," indicating that distrust has become normalized even within advising practice. In some cases, this mistrust was grounded in experience of harm. One worker described accepting a position she found online, working a full day, and returning the next morning to find the company's page had disappeared. She was never paid.

Even when postings were legitimate, participants complained about opacity. Many began their search with Google, LinkedIn, or Indeed, only to encounter ambiguity. Salary information was frequently absent or presented in wide, algorithmically generated ranges. Job descriptions often failed to clarify day-to-day responsibilities or advancement prospects and job postings were not written in "layman's" terms. Survey data support these findings: only 49% of community college students rated online career search tools as helpful, and just 38% rated them as reliable (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). Workers were slightly more positive, with over half rating online tools as both helpful and reliable–although this is lower than the ratings for most other sources (see fig. 5 and 6).

This pattern is consistent with broader research showing that low-income job seekers are less likely to experience success through online platforms than their higher-income peers.[38,39] The challenge, then, is not just associated with access, but differential returns to digital navigation.

Online labor market platforms may surface opportunities, but without trusted intermediaries to interpret and validate information, many workers and learners struggle to translate online searches into meaningful career decisions.

Information Overload and Expectation Misalignment

Reliance on online platforms can also shape career expectations in ways that do not align with labor market realities. In many cases, traditional and social media shape career aspirations long before individuals encounter structured labor market data. Several participants described forming initial career interests through television, social media, and online forums. One student mentioned that her interest in medicine began through television dramas:

> *"Before I even decided to do medicine... I was already interested in it because of shows like Grey's Anatomy."*

Three participants described relying on Reddit threads to learn about companies and job roles, treating peer discussions as primary information sources. A career coach observed that social media amplifies short-lived career trends, with clients pursuing roles they encountered on TikTok or YouTube without fully understanding credential requirements or advancement pathways.

While media-driven signals can spark interest, they often provide incomplete or misleading signals about

Figure 5: **Rating Career Information Reliability**

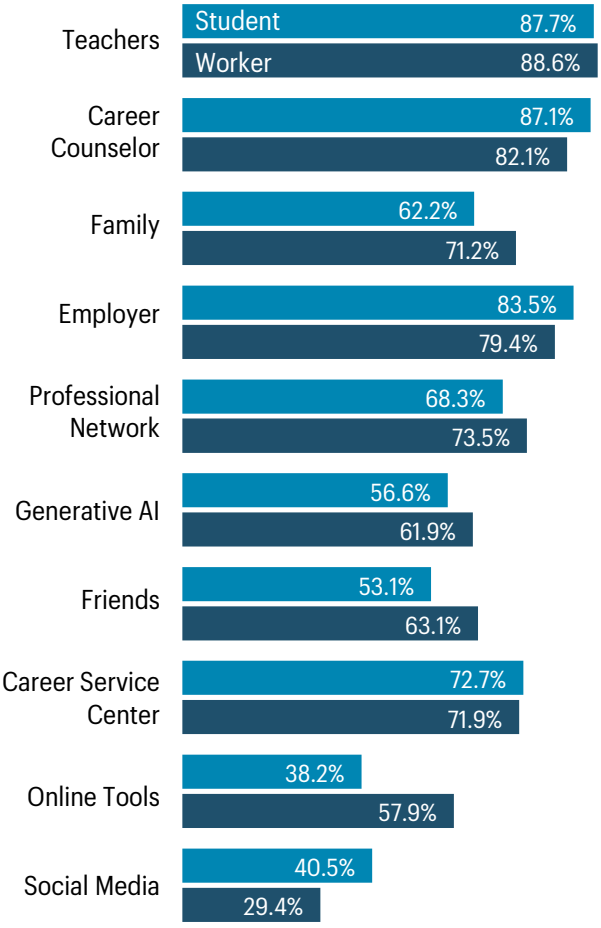
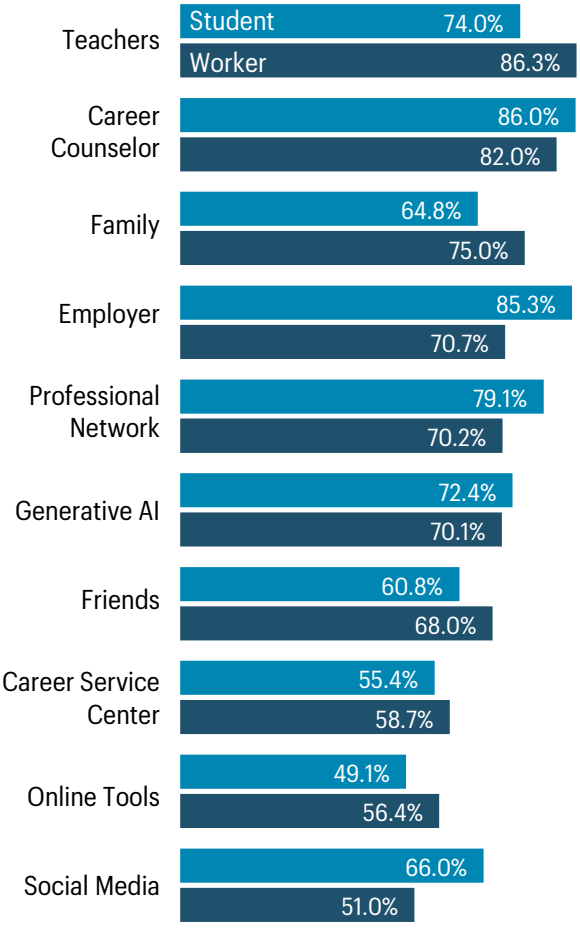


Figure 6: **Rating Career Information Helpfulness**



the realities of work. One student who enrolled in criminal justice after years of watching crime shows later realized that the program focused heavily on policing rather than forensic science, a mismatch she had not anticipated. "I went into it very blindly," she reflected, wishing she had understood the program in more detail before enrolling.

In another case, a participant applied for a preschool teaching role that was advertised as an educational role, only to discover that the position primarily involved custodial tasks. This gap between advertised images and actual work recurred across interviews, challenging career decision-making.

Salary expectations were particularly prone to confusion. Career coaches described clients entering training programs focused on high-earning tech roles after encountering 'six-figure salary, no degree' narratives online, and attempts to recalibrate expectations were often met with resistance. "No matter what we do, they just take that number and run," the same coach noted, describing clients who returned months later confused about why high-paying offers had not materialized.

Survey data suggest that such misalignment is not uncommon. Community college students express high confidence in their career beliefs—over 70% report confidence in their understanding of their ideal career—and more than three-quarters of workers express similar assurance. Yet, fewer than half can name specific employers in their desired field. Experimental evidence shows that students systematically overestimate earnings and underestimate employment risk,[40] and that providing accurate salary information shifts major choice.[41]

Participants also described the cognitive burden of navigating contradictory signals across platforms. As one worker explained,

"One website says one thing, and another website says another thing, and it gets confusing."

They also described seeing job postings labeled "entry-level" that simultaneously required prior experience. Without a designated or trusted interpretive source, job seekers are left to reconcile inconsistent data, descriptions, and credential requirements on their own, complicating the process of identifying realistic opportunities.

Structural Filters and Algorithmic Barriers

Participants also described navigating a job market shaped by opaque hiring processes and automated screening tools. Even when job seekers identified opportunities online, they often encountered application processes that provided little transparency about how candidates were evaluated or why applications were rejected. As a result, many participants experienced the job search process as one in which applications disappeared without producing any feedback.

This experience was most vividly captured by one community college participant with twelve years of management experience who had previously earned $147,000 annually. After a layoff and relocation, he submitted 1,600 applications in a single year and received just three interviews. Reflecting on the experience, he concluded:

"The only thing that makes sense to me is that the applicant tracking systems must be kicking me out... because I don't have a college degree."

His experience reflects a broader phenomenon documented nationally. A pre-pandemic study estimates that more than 27 million US workers are "hidden workers"—individuals who are willing and able to work but are systematically screened out by automated hiring systems that filter for degrees, continuous employment histories, and narrow credential matches.[42]

Career coaches confirmed that application systems have grown increasingly complex. Portals now require multiple accounts, duplicative data, and resumes formatted to meet specific and opaque algorithmic criteria. As one coach noted, even extensive training on applicant tracking systems (ATS) offers no guarantee of advancement. Candidates submit "a million applications" for low-wage positions such as dishwashing or cleaning and still receive no response — a burden of proof wildly disproportionate to the value of the role.

Those structural screens also reshape job search behavior in ways that further limit opportunity. Some participants described self-screening–choosing not to apply for positions if they lacked even one listed qualification. As one worker admitted, "I have a tendency to back away if there's something in the qualifications that I'm missing."

At the same time, interviews revealed that some barriers are bypassed by social connections. One community college participant described receiving an opportunity through networking, despite lacking formal credential requirements: "I didn't have the degree... I didn't have three years of experience, but because I networked... one of the managers... was like, oh, we want to hire her."

Others described similar patterns: while online applications yielded silence, personal connections generated offers, highlighting how hiring systems can reinforce existing inequalities in access to opportunity. When applications are filtered through rigid algorithmic systems, most candidates are unable to distinguish themselves. In contrast, individuals with professional connections bypass filters through referrals.

The survey findings confirm that dynamic. Workers who report receiving career information from multiple sources are more likely to report being on a career pathway, but when job seekers rely solely on digital channels, algorithmic and credential barriers become more difficult to overcome. Together, these findings suggest that hiring systems function as a critical bottleneck in career navigation.

Institutional Translation Gaps

Education institutions are often expected to bridge the gap between complex labor market signals and students' career decisions. In principle, colleges and training providers can help translate information into structured guidance and connections that help students make the transition from education to employment. Yet, participants described a profound disconnect between education and work.

Many students entered community college with an expectation of a straightforward transition: education would lead directly into employment. As one student reflected: "You go to school, you do an internship, you get a career right after. That's what I thought was supposed to happen… That did not happen that way."

Instead, participants described discovering credential requirements, workplace norms, and advancement pathways only through trial and error after entering the labor market. That is consistent with research conducted by Hana Lahr and colleagues, which found that students with limited exposure to concrete information often navigate by experimentation.[43] One worker participant summarized the feeling succinctly:

"I feel like I just got pushed into the outside world without knowing anything."

Students may encounter scattered data about wages, job demand, or required credentials, but they often lack structured opportunities to interpret that information in ways that inform concrete career decisions. Several participants noted that their coursework rarely addresses practical labor market realities—expected wages, working conditions, or promotion pathways–leaving them to find such information on their own.

Institutional capacity constraints compound this gap. Across community colleges, career services offices often operate with limited staffing and resources, and organizational structures vary widely. In some institutions, career offices exist within student affairs, while in others, they are located in academic affairs or newly created divisions. One coach, working in a recently established office, described: "This whole office is brand new… we don't really have a lot of systems in place."

Career coaches often rely on the same digital tools as students—LinkedIn, Indeed, and Handshake—but they can offer interpretive scaffolding to those searches. One sector-based coach described guiding clients through Bureau of Labor Statistics data and salary platforms early in training to recalibrate career expectations.

Even where career staff are knowledgeable, however, institutional silos limit their reach. Coaches described difficulty coordinating with faculty, despite the fact that professors often have valuable industry connections. In practice, such connections frequently function as "pocket opportunities" that flow to students within specific courses or networks, rather than the broader population through an institutionalized advising system.

Such limitations help explain a persistent paradox in the survey data. Teachers and counselors are rated among the most helpful and reliable sources of career information, yet they are among the least frequently used. Fewer than 12% of low-wage workers reported receiving information from teachers, and fewer than 8% reported receiving it from career counselors. As a result, many students and workers continue to interpret labor market signals independently, relying on fragmented information and personal networks to guide their decisions.

Unequal Pathway Clarity

Information barriers are not evenly distributed across career fields. Some sectors provide relatively structured, visible pathways into employment, while others are effectively informational deserts.

Healthcare emerged as one of the most comprehensible sectors in interviews. Students pursuing nursing or allied health programs described clear credential sequences, licensure requirements, clinical placements, and recognizable job titles. The pathway from training to employment appeared linear and visible. As one community college student shared:

"In nursing, it's easy to get a job. You just go to a hospital and look online and they want you, typically."

Those pathways were often reinforced via social networks. A career coach noted that within certain immigrant communities, information about healthcare roles circulates widely: "People are all talking to each other about what the opportunities are…a lot of people want to be CNAs."

In those cases, community networks transmit not only aspiration but practical knowledge about certifications, employers, and wage expectations. The structure of the occupation— standardized credentials, regulated licensing, and large (hospital) employers— combines with dense social networks to create a relatively transparent pathway.

By contrast, students pursuing emerging or less structured fields described navigating without such clear guidance. A student studying cybersecurity explained: "You kind of have to be on your own, and do your own research."

Unlike healthcare, fields like cybersecurity often lack clear pathways or widely-recognized credentials. For students without existing networks or industry connections, identifying viable education and career opportunities can require extensive independent research and experimentation.

Survey findings reinforced this trend. Individuals in fields with standardized and well-understood pathways and credentials, like nursing, are more confident in their skills acquisition and career pathways. In other sectors, where occupational structures are more fragmented or poorly defined, informational burdens intensify, and mobility hinges more heavily on social capital.

The Promise and Challenge of Generative AI

The emergence of generative AI adds another layer to an already complex information environment. Participants' direct use of generative AI tools was limited at the time of this study, but the rapid emergence of these technologies suggests they may play a growing role in shaping how career information is produced and interpreted.

Survey data from fall 2024 show that the use of AI tools to access career information remains relatively low among low-wage workers and community college students. At the time of survey, only about 4% of low-wage workers and 7% of community college students had recently received career information from AI tools, while roughly 2% and 4%, respectively, used AI as a primary information source. During our interviews and focus groups, individuals rarely mentioned generative AI on their own. When the topic was raised by the research team, participants gave cautious responses. One student studying physical therapy reported that generative AI tools gave her "extra information" that felt irrelevant to her career journey, such as offering alternative career paths like medical assistant.

This account—specifically the recommendation to pursue a medical assistant position–sheds light on the algorithmic bias trained in many AI-powered career tools.[44] Large language models (LLMs) rely on past data to generate predictive outputs.[45] The unintended consequences may result in LLMs learning to generate responses that encourage or discourage certain groups from pursuing specific career fields, reinforcing occupational segregation.

Career coaches raised similar concerns with AI-powered tools. One coach described generative AI as contributing to a broader problem of "hack culture" within the job search ecosystem, where tools promise shortcuts to employment. Rather than simplifying the landscape, however, AI tools are intensifying the noise. One coach recounted that a client used ChatGPT to generate a cover letter after uploading her resume, but "ChatGPT hallucinated an experience that they didn't have."

Such risks can be particularly significant for job seekers with limited digital literacy or familiarity with professional norms. AI-generated materials may introduce language or claims that do not reflect a candidate's background, potentially undermining their credibility during hiring.

At the same time, some early adopters reported that generative AI tools can be helpful.[46] When used carefully, AI tools can help synthesize labor market data and personalize search strategies. In principle, it could function as a scalable interpretive intermediary — precisely the infrastructure many participants lack. At present, those tools overall remain nascent and layered atop imperfect and unevenly accessible information systems. Without safeguards related to accuracy, bias, and digital literacy, generative AI risks amplify existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

Implications

In total, our findings illustrate a central paradox of today's career information landscape: information about work has never been more abundant, yet it is difficult to interpret or trust. As a result, many workers, and a larger share of students, turn to family and friends to find, interpret, and validate career information. As we explore in the next section, while personal connections can function as important sources of support, they can also reinforce occupational clustering within familiar industries or low-wage sectors.

The navigation system lacks an interpretive infrastructure to curate, analyze, and contextualize labor market information so that workers and learners can understand the pathways available to them. Without such support–whether it be human or digital–individuals must decipher fragmented and often misleading information on their own, increasing the risk of misaligned decisions and stalled mobility.

Social Capital

Information alone does not determine career mobility. Opportunities are often transmitted through social networks that provide exposure to occupations, referrals to employers, and informal, nuanced advice. Research has long documented the role of social capital in shaping economic outcomes, often summarized in the adage, "your network is your net worth."[47,48]

Networks function as a critical navigation resource, and in interviews and focus groups, participants described relying heavily on personal connections. Family and friends often provided significant, valuable emotional support and practical career advice. At the same time, the structure of those networks often constrained the information individuals received. When networks are stratified by income and occupation, they can reproduce existing job patterns and associated economic inequalities, rather than expand access to new opportunities.

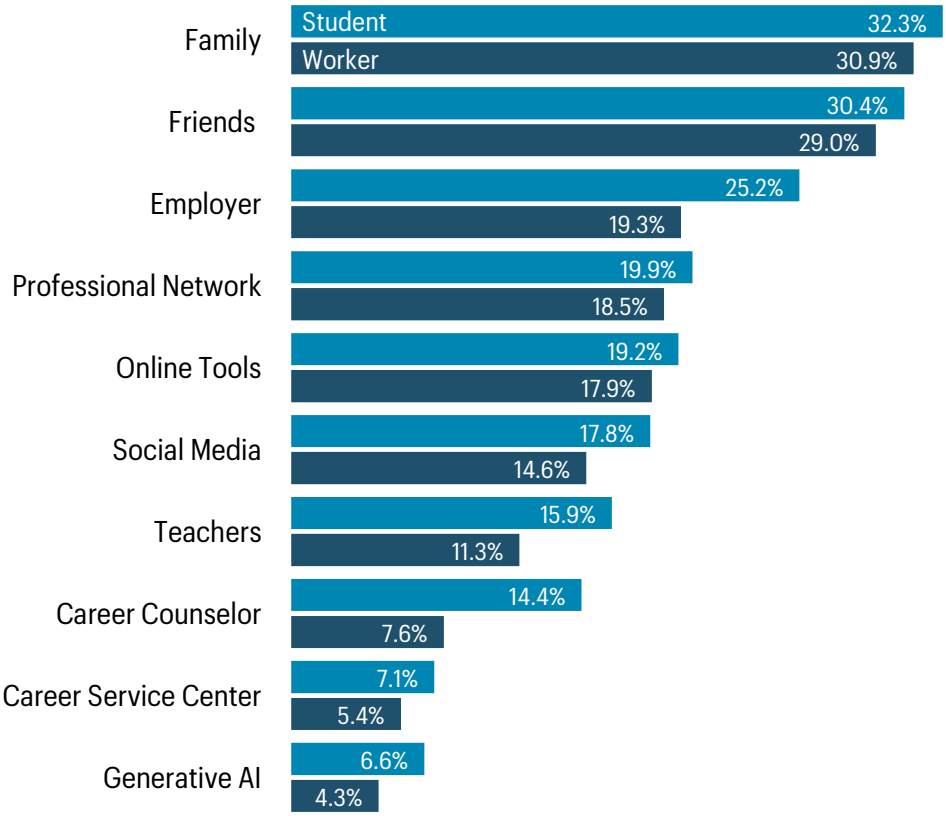
Our analysis examines the multiple sources and functions of social capital among workers and students in their educational and career journeys. In practice, networks often determine not just what individuals know about opportunities, but whether they can access them. We find that social capital can function both as a support system and a gatekeeping mechanism in career navigation.

Strong Ties in Families and Friends

Survey findings indicate that family and friends were the most common sources of information for both workers and students (see fig. 7). Approximately one third of students and workers identified these strong ties as their primary source of information when making decisions.

In focus groups and interviews, participants frequently mentioned turning to family members as information sources. They relied on personal networks more frequently than resources available through the

Figure 7: **Career Information Sources in the Past Six Months**



internet. One community college student explained that she entered college undecided about which field to purse, but after seeing her cousin become a registered nurse, she decided to follow in their footsteps: "I have family workers that work in the healthcare field, so if I have questions, I can go to them."

Personal connections often provided tangible examples of career pathways and encouragement for individuals to pursue new opportunities. In one interview, a 33-year old Black man who had recently relocated to Pittsburgh described navigating the logistics and warehouse industry in a predominantly white, unionized city. He relies heavily on word-of-mouth to learn about job openings and workplace cultures:

> *"First I go to my friends…I go to people that have made career decisions, and it's worked for them, because I feel like if they did it, and they successfully did it, then why not go to them and figure it out?"*

Qualitative findings also point to the importance of the social and emotional support people receive from their connections. Participants described family members who believe in them, children who cheered them on, and peers who provide solidarity. In one interview, a 34-year old woman from El Salvador thanked the individuals who helped her along the way, including her grandmother, who supported her education:"Gracias a mi abuela, porque gran parte de los gastos creo que fue ella la que hizo todo porque nosotros saliéramos adelante [Thanks to my grandmother, because I think she was the one who did everything for us to get ahead]."

In some cases, career decision-making represented an intergenerational project. Akosah-Twumasi and colleagues found that individuals from collectivist cultures, in particular, were more likely to be influenced by family, and higher career congruence with family values was associated with greater career self-efficacy.[49] In a focus group of community college students, one participant noted that this is especially true among immigrant families; other participants responded with visible agreement:

> *"One thing about immigrant families is that you gotta do something that everyone agrees with… If someone is a doctor, you gotta be a doctor, and everyone else in the family gotta be a doctor."*

By this account, pursuing an educational pathway or career is not an individual act, but a fulfillment of familial responsibility. While families can provide support and guidance, they may also restrict the extent to which individuals engage in career exploration.

Limitation of Strong Ties

Research shows that social networks are often stratified by income.[50] As a result, individuals may receive information from their networks about opportunities within industries or roles already familiar to them. For low-wage communities, this can limit exposure to higher-paying jobs that may have more mobility or stability.[51,52]

Thus, for many workers in low-wage jobs, their network often places a ceiling for their mobility. Career coaches noted that even when workers sought training in more promising career fields, their placement was ultimately determined by their network, not their skills. Another coach mentioned an influx of individuals training to CNAs because "that's what everybody else is doing" in their community.

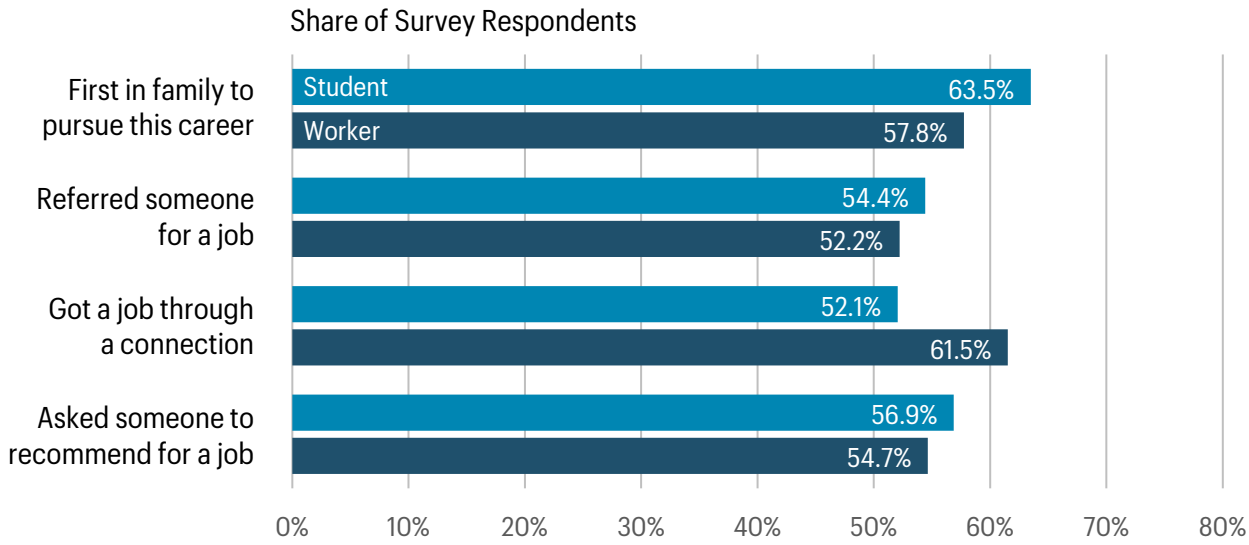
The workers we spoke with, however, were not critical of the opportunities they received. Three in five low-wage workers in our survey reported securing a job through a connection (see fig. 8), and eight of the workers in our qualitative analysis received job referrals. Even when referrals did not align with their career goals, individuals interpreted them as signs of mutual aid and community. One worker expressed gratitude to a friend for referring her for a job at an assisted living facility. While it did not directly support her long-term career objectives, the position provided her a livelihood that sustained her.

Weak Ties and Professional Networks

While strong ties provide support, weak ties—connections outside close personal networks—can provide access to new industries or career paths. Research on labor markets has long emphasized the importance of weak ties in connecting individuals to opportunities beyond their immediate social circles.[53] Yet, many of the study participants lacked such connections.

Community college students reported having larger professional networks with broader career exposure than low-wage workers. Nonetheless, access to cross-sector or cross-income ties remain rare across both groups. Community college participants, in particular, recognized the limits of their networks, especially in new career fields. One computer science student joined a club for women in computer programming,

Figure 8: **Social Capital Use in Students and Workers (Survey)**



but was disappointed to discover that there were no events offered during the semester. Another participant connected with a network of Black professionals in technology. While he found community, he struggled to translate those relationships into employment opportunities in the industry.

Mentorship as Transformative Social Capital

Despite the limitations of their networks, many participants described individual mentors who played pivotal roles in shaping their career decisions. Although participants rarely used the formal term "mentor," many identified specific individuals—often teachers—whose guidance influenced their educational and professional choices. Those relationships often provided encouragement, exposure to new career possibilities, and concrete advice about education or training pathways.

Both workers and students spoke fondly of their mentors, sharing key moments that changed their career trajectory. One young man attributed his motivation to return to study engineering to one professor: "If I didn't meet him, I definitely would not be here."

In other accounts, participants felt like their mentors recognized potential in them that they were not aware of. One student described her career journey as a "zigzag," hopping between multiple retail jobs and internships for a couple of years after high school, until having a conversation with her pastor. They suggested she pursue nursing. The same day, she enrolled in community college as a health science major.

Implications

Taken together, these findings highlight the complex role of social capital in career navigation. Workers and learners in our study rely predominantly on personal connections or strong ties, which provide critical support, but may limit exposure to new employment opportunities.

For individuals seeking to transition into upward career paths, access to diverse networks and mentors can be critical. Without intentional efforts to expand networks, many individuals will continue to face limited exposure to high-opportunity pathways, constraining their ability to advance.

Job Quality

The conditions of work also shape individuals' capacity to navigate careers. For many workers and learners in our study, decisions about education, training, or job transitions were made under significant economic and logistical constraints. Unstable schedules, low wages, and long commutes limit the time and resources

participants can devote to training, networking, or job search activities that support upward mobility.[54,55]

Such constraints highlight an often-overlooked dimension of career mobility: the quality of current employment can determine whether individuals have the financial stability, time, and cognitive capacity required to work toward advancement. When workers struggle to meet basic needs, career planning often becomes secondary to immediate survival. Job quality is not just an outcome, but a condition of mobility.

Participants frequently described evaluating jobs through a broader set of criteria than wages alone. While a living wage, predictable schedule, and reasonable commute were the paramount considerations, individuals also considered workplace culture and opportunities for advancement. Those factors shaped not only job satisfaction but also their conception of an "ideal job" and their ability to pursue that long-term goal.

Current Realities

Wages and Financial Stability

In our research, wages emerged as the most immediate constraint shaping participants' career decisions. Many workers and learners described frustration with wages that were insufficient to meet basic needs despite full-time employment. One nursing student described the economic pressures facing her family:

> *"My brother is working right now in a factory. My father was working a month ago in the factory, now is working with Instacart and Spark, but they work, like, 14 to 16 hours a day, and they don't earn that much. So it's difficult to see them work that hard and don't earn what they deserve."*

Although survey results showed that the majority of low-wage workers report being satisfied with their jobs (62%), qualitative interviews revealed a complex picture. Participants often defined job satisfaction relative to stability or workplace relationships, rather than financial security. In reality, for many workers, earnings are not enough to "make ends meet,"[56] especially when they are the primary earners in their households.

Despite initial reluctance to share wage expectations,[57] workers' and learners' economic pragmatism was clear–and it shaped the way they evaluated career opportunities. Researchers have noted the increased importance of pay in determining job satisfaction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[58] As working conditions became more precarious and income inequality rose, salary expectations increased. One career coach noted,

> *"I have yet to find a client who says, 'you know I'm salary neutral. Just find me something, I don't care.' "*

Nonetheless, when naming wage expectations, participants were quick to qualify their responses by mentioning other aspects of job quality. Respect comes first, as one worker warned, "Not all money is good money. I just want to put that out there."

Location and Transportation

Transportation also emerged as a significant constraint shaping career opportunities. Reliable access to transportation can determine whether workers can reach certain jobs, training programs, or educational institutions. Alongside wages and scheduling, location and commute were the top factors influencing job selection for workers in our survey.

Participants described how commuting challenges limited the range of jobs they could realistically pursue. A 34-year old home care worker in Boston described how public transit limits which clients she can accept:

> *"Cuando no tienen buen transporte, ya uno no lo coge porque, lamentablemente no hay facilidad para llegarle al horario que tiene que llegarle [When there's no good transportation, you don't take the client because there's no way to arrive on time]."*

In metropolitan areas, low-income and minority workers are less likely to be in proximity to employment opportunities than their affluent and white counterparts.[59] For students, limited transportation may prevent them from pursuing work-based learning opportunities that are integral to career navigation. In one interview, a student went so far as to consider purchasing a car to expand job opportunities.

Scheduling and Time Constraints

Beyond wages, unstable work schedules were a major barrier to career navigation. Many participants described working in jobs that left them with little control of their schedules. Instead, they contended

with fluctuating hours, last-minute scheduling changes, and on-call shifts. These practices are especially acute in service jobs, leading to income volatility and high stress.[60] Such conditions make it difficult to engage in career advancement activities.

In one instance, a worker described waiting several days for her schedule after starting a new job as a home health aide. She eventually had to press her supervisor for the right information: "there was no type of organization at all."

Unstable work schedules not only prevented participants not only from adjusting to their jobs, but it prevented them from engaging in planning. One career coach described this challenge:

> *"Now you need another full-time minimum wage job to make up for this one that's not full-time anymore, and when do we have time to actually help you work on long-term?"*

Constraints are particularly acute for working community college students, many of whom are navigating strict course requirements at the same time as working in low-paying jobs.[61] In interviews and focus groups, students discussed this pull between survival needs and long-term goals. As one student, balancing full-time work and full-time study, explained, it is "a bit hard focusing on both of them at the same time."

Another student, a 26-year old father, brought his 2-year old daughter to the focus group. She fidgeted in his lap while he outlined the regimented schedule he maintains: working night shifts, parenting, and attending class. Time is rarely afforded for workers and students, especially those in pursuit of better job opportunities. One career coach described a client who had completed hotel housekeeping training and was ready to work, but could not find a job that would allow her to be home in time to pick up her children from school. "She's like, well, I can work from 9 to 6 every day, but then I have to pick up my kids. That's it, that's the deal breaker, every single time."

Work Environment

Participants also emphasized the importance of workplace culture and relationships with supervisors and colleagues. Those factors influenced not only job satisfaction but also the ability to develop skills and pursue advancement.

Many participants described how supportive supervisors encouraged learning and growth, while hostile work environments discouraged risk-taking or professional development, especially among younger individuals. One 24-year old Black college student explained that unless he trusts his manager, "I don't really feel safe to step out of my comfort zone."

When participants discussed the work environment they wanted, they focused on how it felt to work and how colleagues treated one another. Many noted the importance of protecting their mental health in the workplace. In one of the worker focus groups, a 23-year old Latinx man who held a series of warehouse jobs asserted:

> *"I'm a human first before I'm an employee, so if you can't see that, then what is the point of me working for you?"*

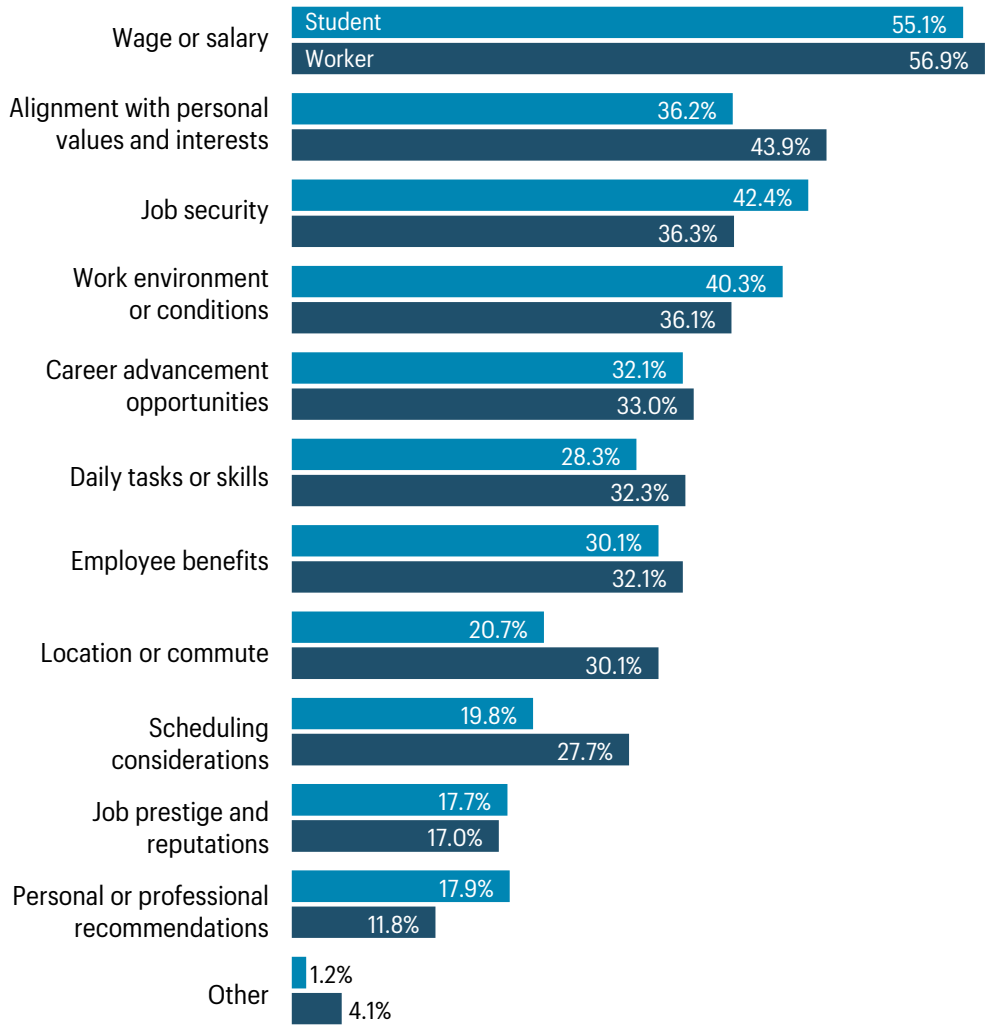
Participants also described the psychological toll of environments characterized by disrespect, discrimination, or microaggressions. Four workers described instances ranging between microaggression and explicit discrimination. Facets of their identity—age, race, gender, or the intersection of those identities–were scrutinized in a way that left them feeling unwelcome and undervalued. In one interview, a 48-year old Black woman working as a public school educator noted that the microaggressions compounded, and she was forced to choose between her job and her mental well-being.

In such settings, individuals often prioritized leaving the workplace quickly, as opposed to finding an optimal career next step. Those experiences reinforce research showing that workplace relationships and organizational culture can shape whether workers receive mentorship, information about advancement opportunities, or encouragement to pursue additional training.[62]

Ideal Career

Participants' descriptions of their ideal career paths provide additional insight into how workers and students evaluate job opportunities. While wages were consistently important, participants emphasized a broader set of factors that shaped their career aspirations. They included opportunities for advancement, workplace environment, job security, scheduling flexibility, and alignment with personal values or interests (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: **Considerations When Selecting Idea Career**



Although wages were often the starting point for evaluating career opportunities, participants emphasized that financial stability alone was not sufficient. For many participants, an ideal career was defined not only by security but also by the ability to pursue work that aligned with personal interests or values. Ideal careers are imagined as core to one's identity; as one participant explained, "it's a huge part of my personality."

In the survey, more workers prioritized values and interest alignment than community college students (43% vs. 36%). Given more than half of students (58%) chose their field of study based on interest, it is possible that students see their education and career journeys as distinct rather than integrated. That said, students spoke at great lengths about how their ideal career is fueled by their interests. Take one 19-year old math student, whose fascination with earth science and "storm chasing" videos inspired to pursue a career in meteorology. She declared, "nothing else sounds cool, like meteorology does to me."

These aspirations often coexisted with considerations about career advancement. Workers and students alike described seeking careers that would allow them to develop skills, progress professionally, and build long-term career security. They perceived their ideal career as a pathway marked by advancement, which stands in contrast to the repeated pivots and cycles of low-wage work that they actually experience.[63]

One student was acutely aware of the impact of generative AI on the labor market and wanted a career that allowed him to build skills to "stay ahead of the curve."

This emphasis reflects an awareness that careers increasingly require continuous skill development in response to evolving labor market demands–and the presence of pathways to higher pay and deeper skills plays a key role in how participants evaluate potential careers.

Flexibility also emerged as an important dimension of perceived job quality, particularly among students. Some participants described seeking careers that would allow for greater work-life balance or remote work opportunities. A computer science student, for example, explained that one reason she chose her field was the possibility of working remotely. Workers, on the other hand, were less likely to mention such expectations. One worker mentioned that working long hours was "kind of what my family and I have grown accustomed to."

The difference between workers and students may point to a generational divide–or reveal how a lack of career exposure can create unrealistic expectations for some students.

Entrepreneurship as a Path Toward Agency

Both students and workers in our sample named entrepreneurship as a path to career flexibility, meaningful work, and opportunities for advancement. When participants discussed self-employment or starting their own business, they described it as a way to bypass traditional corporate hierarchies and exercise greater control over their career trajectories.

In one interview, an early childhood worker described her ideal career as owning her own business:

> *"I will have the ability to set my own policies, or whatever the case may be, and also be that guidance and that resource for parents. And... you know, hire people who love... who have the same passion as I do."*

For this worker and others like her, self-employment represents a pathway to designing the environment, relationships, and impact that they cannot count on within traditional employment structures.

Notably, none of the coaches we interviewed mentioned clients pursuing entrepreneurship careers, even though both students and workers raised the topic. Coaches spoke extensively about helping people build skills, avoid becoming "stalemated," and move up within existing organizations, but did not reference business ownership as a career option. This gap suggests that while some participants see entrepreneurship as a viable route, it is unlikely to feature in conversations with advisors.

A recent analysis by labor economist Ege Aksu found that the share of job-switchers moving into entrepreneurship has reached a seven-year high, rising most sharply among workers without college degrees.[64] Meanwhile, the average age of new entrepreneurs has fallen to under 34 years old. In a cooling labor market, entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a serious early-career option rather than a late-career pivot.

Implications

As a whole, these findings highlight how job quality shapes the conditions under which career decisions are made. Workers and learners in this study consistently described navigating education and employment choices within the constraints of low wages, unstable schedules, long commutes, and difficult workplace environments. These factors influence not only job satisfaction but also the ability to pursue opportunities that support long-term advancement.

Such dynamics suggest that improving job quality is an important, though often overlooked, component of economic mobility. Stable wages, predictable schedules, and supportive environments can provide the foundation that allows workers to pursue additional education, explore new career paths, and invest in skill development. Employers should take note of these preferences, as the costs associated with voluntary turnover mount in the era of AI.

Participants' descriptions of their ideal careers further illustrate that point. Workers and students emphasized a broad set of priorities, including meaningful work and opportunities for growth. Across focus groups and interviews, we found participants attending to a form of 'career calculus,' negotiating competing priorities as they try to advance. Ultimately, strengthening foundational job quality conditions is critical not only for worker well-being, but for enabling individuals to engage in the navigation activities necessary for long-term mobility.

Skills

In addition to external resources, career navigation also depends on the development of durable and navigational skills that help individuals interpret labor market signals, communicate their abilities to employers, and adapt to changing career circumstances.[65] As careers become increasingly self-directed,[66] those skills become more important. Yet opportunities to develop them systematically remain limited within many education and workforce programs.

In our research, we asked workers and students to evaluate their skills, providing insight into both their confidence and skill development. Survey findings indicate that both groups report relatively high levels of confidence in their abilities. At the same time, interview and focus group participants frequently described developing durable and navigational skills through work experience rather than formal instruction. For many, navigating the labor market itself became a process through which they built capabilities such as persistence, self-advocacy, and strategic decision-making.

Durable Skills

Qualitative findings provide additional insight into how participants understood their own abilities. When asked about the skills that had helped them most in their career journeys, participants overwhelmingly emphasized durable skills—also known as soft, human, or foundational skills—including communication and the ability to work with others.

Durable skills have become increasingly valuable in the job market as technology reshapes the demand for routine tasks.[67] Across interviews and focus groups, participants described their most valuable skills that helped them adapt to new roles and navigate workplace relationships. Our coding of transcripts identified several clusters of skills identified by participants (see fig. 11).

Social and interpersonal abilities were the most frequently cited. Participants described communication skills, teamwork, and the ability to interact with diverse groups of people as critical to their success in the workplace. One worker, a 29-year old Black woman, pointed out the utility of adapting communication styles when interacting with different individuals, or "code-switching," in her role at a "front desk job" as "the first face" of the company.

Such accounts also illustrate how durable skills are often context-dependent, and often laden with power differentials.[68] Communication in professional environments may require different strategies than communication with peers or family members, and individuals often develop these skills through workplace experience rather than formal training.

Navigation Skills

In addition to durable skills, participants frequently described abilities related to career navigation itself. Capabilities such as persistence, adaptability, goal-setting, and self-advocacy can be understood as

Figure 10: **Skills Confidence**

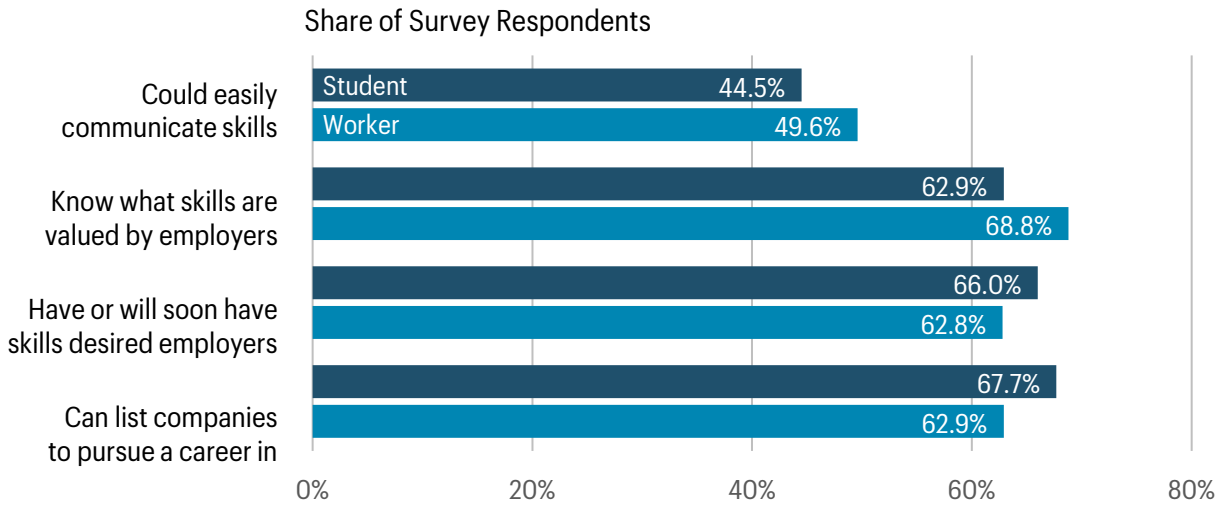


Figure 11: **Breakdown of "Most Valuable" Skills (Qualitative Sample)**

Social/Interpersonal	31
Advocating for yourself/Standing up for yourself/Self-agency/Assertiveness	7
Communication/Public speaking	7
Listening	3
Customer service	3
Networking	2
Teamwork/Collaboration	2
People/Interpersonal skills	3
Self-positioning	1
Leadership	1
Coaching others	1
Cultural humility	1
Self-management	**20**
Adaptability/Flexibility	8
Patience	4
Persistence	1
Self-control	1
Discipline	1
Goal-oriented	1
Organization	2
Time management	1
Accountability	1
Higher-order	**5**
Problem-solving	2
Critical thinking	1
Documenting	1
Big-picture thinking	1
Technical	**5**
Math	1
Cybersecurity	1
Digital design	1
Computer	1
CPR	1
Total	**61**

navigation skills, enabling individuals to make informed career decisions, pursue opportunities, and stay motivated along their desired career path. One 25-year old student returned to community college to study respiratory therapy after leaving a four-year university for mental health needs. She described the self-advocacy skills she learned:

> *"I think the biggest skill is learning to... advocate for myself... In class, when I need help, I make sure I go back to the professor or someone else. And, when I was getting prepared for going back to school. I had to advocate for myself when I was doing all the financial aid stuff. So it's just... Really taught me how to...get what I need to get done."*

Similarly, one worker described using "SMART" goal-setting strategies to guide decisions. After planning, she just "goes for it," explaining, "And if it doesn't work? Oh well, it's not like I didn't try." That said, less than half of workers and students (47% and 43%, respectively) reported having a structured decision-making process for career choices in our survey. Navigation skills are often developed through trial-and-error; workers and learners build these capabilities gradually as they encounter new challenges, rather than through formal instruction.

Uneven Opportunities for Skill Development

Despite the importance of both durable and navigation skills, opportunities to develop those abilities systematically remain uneven. There is no set curriculum or skill standard for career navigation. Students may have access to learning opportunities through experiential programs, but the availability and quality of these experiences varies significantly across institutions and programs.[69]

For workers, the workplace itself often serves as the pivotal environment for developing communication,

teamwork, and problem-solving skills. While workers may feel confident in their interpersonal abilities, employers report gaps in professional communication or workplace readiness.[70,71,72] There appears to be a marked disconnect in both perception and opportunity to learn. This suggests a gap not only in skill development, but in how skills are understood, demonstrated, and evaluated in the labor market.

Implications

The findings highlight how skill development interacts with career navigation. First, durable skills such as communication and teamwork enable individuals to function effectively across a wide range of workplaces. Second, navigation skills—such as persistence, self-advocacy, and decision-making—help individuals interpret opportunities and respond to changing labor market conditions. In the absence of formal instruction to support this skill development, individuals resort to trial and error, sometimes incurring significant costs along the way. Expanding structured opportunities for career exploration and coached decision-making may help individuals build the navigation capabilities they need to support mobility without costly mistakes.

Career Guidance and Support

Formal guidance can play a critical role in helping workers and learners interpret career information, make plans, and maintain momentum through transitions. Career coaches, advisors, and workforce organizations often serve as essential intermediaries, helping individuals translate labor market signals into decisions. Participants consistently describe the value of these relationships in helping them clarify goals, navigate institutional processes, and persist through setbacks.

At the same time, access to such support was uneven. Many career coaches operate within resource-constrained environments characterized by high caseloads, limited data infrastructure, and expanding responsibilities that extend beyond traditional advising. When coaching is accessible and well-resourced, individuals can establish and meet career goals. When those systems are fragmented or under-resourced, workers and learners must navigate transitions largely on their own.

Workforce Supports and Wraparound Services

Many participants described relying on a range of wraparound supports that helped stabilize their lives and enabled them to pursue education or employment opportunities. These supports included public benefits, workforce training programs, and social service referrals that addressed basic needs such as childcare, transportation, or housing.

Three participants–two workers and one student, all mothers–described accessing training opportunities through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T) services. As one mother of four explained, “when you have a kid, they offer a lot of referrals to places” like free classes and career support. These programs often functioned as entry points into career development resources, particularly for individuals who might not otherwise engage with workforce institutions.

Participants also utilized public workforce services for career support, though engagement was limited. Survey findings show that just 4% of workers and students identify career service centers as their primary career information resource. Although workers generally perceive career centers to be trustworthy, they do not view them as particularly helpful. Four qualitative study participants mentioned using the online state job board as part of their job search, while another participant mentioned accessing career assistance through Veteran Affairs.

This aligns with prior research suggesting many individuals are either unaware of public job centers or unfamiliar with the scope of services they offer.[73,74] As a result, programs designed to support career navigation remain underutilized by the populations they aim to serve.

Career Coaches

Among formal career navigation supports, career coaching is one of the most critical, evidence-backed strategies for career advancement.[75,76,77] Coaches help individuals assess their career interests, explore pathways, connect to opportunities, and maintain momentum through transitions.[78] Each of the coaches we spoke with brought a unique perspective to the work.

Although few coaches had prior experience in the field, their career trajectories aligned with the missions of their respective organizations. Each individual came from a different professional background, with varying levels of skill and job-specific knowledge. While some organizations provided formal training and structured curricula, others offered little preparation. As a result, the quality and consistency of coaching varied, with some clients receiving less comprehensive support than others, despite clear dedication across the workforce.

The coaches we interviewed described assuming a myriad of responsibilities beyond career coaching to support their clients. The work often entails significant emotional burdens, as coaches respond to clients' crises and circumstances that affect their stability and capacity to pursue employment. While supporting housing and immigration statuses may fall outside their official job responsibilities, coaches emphasized that effective one-on-one relationships cannot be built without addressing such needs. As one coach remarked, "Everything in their life impacts their ability to get a job and keep a job."

A different coach articulated a deliberate approach to this work, grounded in what the organization calls a human-centric approach:

> *"The whole mission of the organization is really that idea of psychological safety... Unless you're comfortable sitting in front of me sharing about your worst interview experience, I need to make that space for you to want to come off mute and have that story sharing."*

Resource Constraints and Institutional Capacity

Despite their importance, many coaching systems operate under significant resource constraints. Career coaches serve extraordinarily diverse client populations and, therefore, require varied resources to serve their clients effectively. Some need access to digital literacy training, while others require ESL courses.

Interviews with career coaches also revealed substantial variation in the number of clients each coach was responsible for supporting. In some organizations, coaches worked with relatively small groups of clients, allowing for sustained one-on-one engagement. In other contexts—particularly within large community college systems—coaches described serving thousands of students simultaneously (see fig. 12).

Figure 12: **Reported Number of Current Clients from Interviewed Coaches**

Organization	Current Clients Serving
Intermediary	25
Community College	10
Sector-Training	70
Community College	4,700
Sector-Training	250
Intermediary	25
Community College	6

Such differences have significant implications for the depth of support coaches are able to provide. High caseloads limit opportunities for individualized advising and make it difficult to sustain ongoing relationships with clients. One coach in a sector-training program described using technology to maximize his virtual sessions with as many 60 participants at a time. Still, he noted the difficulties of sustaining engagement in a large setting, asking, "how do I make this stick for them?"

Similar accounts revealed frustration among coaches who are invested in their clients' success but feel constrained by institutional structures that limit ongoing engagement. As one coach explained:

> *"That's the toughest part of my job, just really not knowing where the students landed, and not being able to speak to it... I'll just send the one email, and I they don't get back to me, I just hope all is well."*

We found many career services teams are small and siloed within the larger institution. That is especially true for coaches at community colleges, where many roles are grant-funded and field-specific.[79] In some cases, coaches are not only disconnected from faculty and staff across academic departments, they are also siloed within their own team. As one coach stated, "I'm kind of building it as I go." Institutional dynamics can limit the reach of career navigation support even when knowledgeable advisors are present.

Implications

Career coaches, workforce intermediaries, and social service programs can help individuals navigate their careers, particularly during difficult periods. At the same time, the effectiveness of such support depends on institutional capacity. When guidance systems are well-resourced and integrated, they serve as critical components of career navigation infrastructure. When those systems are fragmented or under-resourced, as they often are, workers and learners are left without guidance in a complex labor market. Coaching should not be seen as a supplemental service, but as a core component of our education and workforce system.

Collectively, the findings in this section illustrate how career navigation is shaped by a set of interrelated resources that extend beyond individual motivation. Such components interact to shape individuals' ability to interpret opportunities, act on them, and recover from disruption. Navigation is not simply an individual skill, but a system-level capacity shaped by how information, networks, and supports are organized and delivered. When such resources are available and well-coordinated, workers and learners are able to recover from disruptions and pursue upward mobility. The next section outlines how navigation infrastructure can be strengthened in practice.

Part III

Strengthening Career Navigation Infrastructure

Improving career mobility requires strengthening the systems that support individuals as they navigate increasingly complex and nonlinear labor markets. Career outcomes are not just determined by individual effort, but by access to a set of structural resources that enable career navigation.

Coordinated investments can expand access to opportunity through better information and networks, enable individuals to act through greater stability, and support effective decision-making through skills, coaching, and system alignment. Our recommendations are designed not only to improve individual outcomes, but to strengthen the underlying systems that shape how individuals navigate education and labor markets. The following interventions are complementary; improvements in one area are unlikely to produce sustained mobility without corresponding investments in others.

1. Strengthen information infrastructure as a foundation for navigation.

Incomplete, fragmented, and inconsistent information remains a persistent barrier to advancement, particularly for individuals without access to informal knowledge through social networks. Within community colleges, career resources are often poorly promoted, disconnected from academic programs, or framed as optional rather than integral to a student's educational journey. Meanwhile, program requirements, labor market alignment, and post-completion employment outcomes are insufficiently communicated.

In low-wage work settings, information gaps are even more pronounced. Few workers report receiving career guidance from supervisors, and fewer than one in five obtained career information from their coworkers or managers in our survey. Although digital platforms have expanded access to labor market data, they have shifted the burden of information interpretation onto individuals. Without trusted intermediaries to translate data into context-specific guidance, like coaches or mentors, information abundance—paired with digital literacy gaps—can exacerbate rather than reduce inequality.

Career information should be curated, transparent, and embedded within trusted institutions, such as colleges, workforce intermediaries, and employers. In practice, this includes clearly communicating program-level outcomes (such as typical employers, placement rates, and wages), ensuring job postings reflect active and accurately-described roles, and integrating data into advising and instruction. Institutions should invest in training staff or digital tools that help individuals interpret job information, evaluate opportunities, and identify realistic pathways. Dallas Community College's Labor Market Intelligence Center offers a strong example. The college provides accessible labor market data to students on which programs lead to promising careers, enabling them to make more adaptive decisions.

Employers should regularly share information about pay, benefits, and pathways, while technology platforms should improve transparency and accuracy. Platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed are proactively adding applicant activity indicators and verification badges to combat ghost jobs. Meanwhile, policymakers could require that postings reflect active, funded roles, include expected hiring timelines, and expire after a defined period unless updated. Platforms could also be required to label listings based on employer responsiveness or hiring activity. Together, such measures would help ensure publically-available job information is credible and actionable.

Generative AI tools also offer the potential to personalize and synthesize career information at scale, but require safeguards to ensure accuracy and reduce bias. Additional research and experimentation should be conducted to understand how such tools can augment trusted humans and how to ensure tools do not exacerbate inequalities.

2. Expand access to cross-income social capital to translate information into opportunity.

Social networks remain one of the most important sources of career information, yet they are often constrained within income and occupational boundaries. Expanding access to cross-sector and cross-income networks is critical to improving mobility, particularly for low-wage workers, who report narrower networks with limited exposure to alternative careers or training opportunities.

Education and workforce programs and systems should intentionally build opportunities for individuals to form cross-income and cross-sector social networks. This may include expanding access to work-based learning experiences, structuring regular interactions with employers and alumni, and embedding mentorship into programs. Cohort-based models and learning communities can also facilitate peer and professional connections that extend beyond program completion. Programs like Braven and Climb Hire, which intentionally integrate social network development into their training and support models, offer strong examples.

At a broader level, place-based investments like HOPE VI, which transformed distressed public housing developments into new, mixed-income neighborhoods, offer low-income children significant economic returns in adulthood.[80] However, it is important to note that adults living in new public housing units did not improve economically. Community colleges may be well-positioned to provide that bridge for adults.[81]

Importantly, social capital should be treated as a measurable outcome, not a byproduct, of education and workforce programs. Institutions should track and evaluate network-building–for example, by measuring whether participants develop relationships in target industries or receive referrals to job opportunities.[82] This is essential to expanding access to opportunity.

3. Improve job quality to enable navigation capacity.

Job quality functions as a precondition for long-term career navigation. For many low-wage workers, unstable schedules, insufficient pay, and long commutes limit their ability to engage in career planning, learning, and risk-taking. In both interviews and survey data, workers described making career decisions under time and financial pressures, understandably prioritizing immediate survival needs ahead of long-term advancement.

At a minimum, jobs must offer adequate pay, predictable schedules, and reasonable commutes. Once basic conditions are met, workers consistently emphasize the importance of purpose, autonomy, and career advancement. Employers should clarify internal advancement pathways, build respectful and safe workplaces, and strengthen managerial support. Managers should provide clear and continuous feedback and support, which is associated with higher levels of confidence among our study participants. Unfortunately, most respondents reported receiving little career support from supervisors, which led to perceptions that advancement was unattainable.

Workforce programs and education providers can support those efforts by prioritizing placement into roles that meet minimum job quality thresholds and by aligning program schedules with the realities of working learners. Wraparound supports—including childcare, transportation, and income supports—can expand individuals' capacity to engage in career navigation activities.

4. Build skills to support effective career navigation.

Career navigation requires a set of skills related to information sensemaking, self-management, and adaptation to evolving circumstances. As careers become less linear and more information-intensive, those skills are becoming more critical. Across interviews and surveys, participants discussed perseverance through academic setbacks, layoffs, health shocks, and family responsibilities. In those cases, individual adaptability and persistence compensates for systemic barriers and instability in education and work–yet the stressful conditions they face may erode the very executive functioning skills that they require.[83]

Education and workforce systems must define and treat navigation skills as core competencies to be taught, practiced, and reinforced over time. Skills must not be considered innate traits or relegated to one-off workshops; rather, they must be fostered and evaluated through structured career exploration opportunities. Embedding applied activities such as job searching,

planning, and career mapping can help individuals build those important capabilities. Guided reflection and coached decision-making at key transition points can help individuals reassess goals and adjust strategies. Institutions should move toward assessing those skills alongside technical competencies, rather than treating them as informal or secondary.

5. Invest in career coaching to support navigation across career trajectories.

Career coaches play a critical role in helping individuals interpret information, navigate tradeoffs, and persist through uncertainty. Yet the coaching workforce faces structural challenges that limit its effectiveness. Many organizations–from colleges to workforce intermediaries–do not employ enough career coaches to maintain manageable caseloads, and coaches face administrative burdens due to inadequate technology and information infrastructure.

Strengthening coaching requires both investment and professionalization. Sustainable funding is critical to ensure coaches have access to the time and technology to adequately serve each client. Clear role definitions and competencies can help ensure coaching focuses on career navigation, while remaining coordinated with other support services. Standardized professional development efforts, like the Virginia Career Coach Certification offered to community college system staff, offer promising models to align coaching training to national career development standards.[84]

Within institutions, career guidance should be integrated across departments, programs, and support offices by breaking down siloes. Deploying hybrid AI-human coaching models may also expand advising capacity, while maintaining quality and trust.

6. Align systems to scale and sustain impact.

Career navigation challenges often reflect fragmentation across the systems that shape access to information, networks, jobs, skills, and opportunity.[85] Improving mobility therefore requires greater alignment across education providers, workforce organizations, government, and employers.

This includes building and investing in workforce intermediaries embedded in communities, which can provide community outreach and wraparound services that other institutions struggle to deliver. Strong examples include Jewish Vocational Services, which provides job services to immigrants and other adults, and NextGen Talent, which provides coaching tools and guidance to high school and college advisors. Trusted organizations with roots in the community can bridge gaps between education and employment.

Employers play a critical role by partnering with education and training providers to build strong regional talent pipelines, instead of relying on "just-in-time" hiring. They should invest in work-based learning programs and develop transparent pathways into and within their organizations.

Policymakers at the state and federal levels should invest in modernized data systems that link education and workforce information, support strong intermediaries, facilitate work-based learning and improved job quality, and align incentives across the system. Equally important, a stronger social safety net—through measures such as income support, unemployment insurance, childcare assistance, and paid leave—can provide individuals with the time and stability they need to engage in meaningful navigation.

Without coordination across education and workforce stakeholders, individuals will continue to shoulder the burden of navigating a volatile labor market alone. With it, career navigation support can function as a shared infrastructure that supports mobility rather than constrains it.

Conclusion

This study examined how low-wage workers and community college students navigate education and employment decisions in an increasingly complex labor market. Across surveys, interviews, and focus groups, participants described career trajectories shaped less by steady pathways than by repeated pivots—switches between jobs, exits from roles or education, and re-entries prompted by economic shocks and personal circumstances. As labor markets become more volatile and career ladders less predictable, individuals must repeatedly interpret labor market signals, evaluate opportunities, and adapt their plans.

In such an environment, economic mobility increasingly depends not only on the skills individuals possess but also on their capacity to navigate transitions over time. Our findings show that this capacity is shaped by access to reliable information, cross-income social networks, stable employment conditions, navigation skills, and institutional guidance, such as career coaching. When these resources are available, workers and learners are better positioned to identify promising opportunities and recover from disruptions. When they are absent, individuals often navigate by trial and error, increasing the risk of stalled mobility and repeated cycles of low-wage work.

Those dynamics suggest that career navigation should not be treated solely as the responsibility of individuals. Instead, it reflects the strength—or weakness—of the systems that support career decision-making across education, workforce, and employer institutions. Reliable labor market information, opportunities to build professional networks, stable job conditions, and accessible coaching services are all critical to successful career navigation. Expanding access to those resources will be critical to improving economic mobility as careers become increasingly nonlinear.

At the same time, this study raises several questions that warrant further research. First, as generative AI tools become more widely used in job search and advising, it will be important to understand how AI-enabled coaching can complement human guidance without amplifying existing inequalities. Second, more research is needed to identify which skills most effectively support career navigation in volatile labor markets, particularly skills related to decision-making, adaptability, and labor market literacy. Third, future studies should examine how social networks can be augmented to provide exposure to higher-wage occupations, especially for workers whose connections are concentrated in low-wage sectors. Finally, additional research is needed to understand which early-career roles provide the strongest foundations for long-term mobility in an era of automation and technological change.

As careers become longer and more nonlinear, the labor market is shifting away from clear career pathways—and whether individuals are able to thrive in this environment will depend less on their individual capacity alone than on the systems built to support them.

Appendix 1: Detailed Methodology

Recruiting for surveys: In fall 2024, we conducted a nationally representative survey to understand how low-wage workers and community college students navigate their careers. The survey was administered using Ipsos' Knowledge Panel, the largest online panel in the United States, which relies on probability-based sampling methods to provide a representative sampling frame of non-institutionalized adults aged 18 and older residing in the United States. Panel members from a representative sample of households were invited by email to participate, with the survey administered in both English and Spanish. The data collection process included a pretest followed by the main survey. Adjustments made after the pretest ensured that only data from the main survey were included in the final dataset.

To ensure the survey was representative of the low-wage worker and community college student population, our research team provided additional weights during survey collection for the following variables: race, gender, and age. A total of 1,009 workers completed the survey, along with 264 current community college students, below the target sample size of 400 student respondents. While the student sample is smaller than intended, results are consistent with qualitative findings and should be interpreted as directional.

Recruiting for focus groups: In collaboration with three community colleges, two workforce intermediaries, and an online career service platform, our research team recruited participants for focus groups and interviews in the greater-Boston area and nationally. With the help of site liaisons (most of those working in career services) at each organization, we sent flyers advertising the paid focus group or opportunity with a link to a screener survey. After confirming eligibility, we emailed eligible, interested participants to invite them to the focus group session and complete demographic survey and consent form.

In addition to using the survey findings to develop the focus group and interview protocol, we sought out feedback from experts in the career navigation field including frontline workers, researchers, and practitioners. The focus group protocol consisted of reflection activities and open-ended questions on the participant's career (and education for community college student's) journey, career information, decision-making, and ideal career (see Appendix 2). The sessions lasted an hour and a half, some in-person hosted by the organization and others over video call. The interview protocol focused on the same topics, with more in-depth questions for 45 minutes over zoom (see Appendix 3).

After the first month of data collection, the research team met over a half-day white boarding to discuss emerging results and make additional revisions to the focus group protocol. The research team started an initial codebook based on job quality, career information, and inflection points. We also included codes related to social capital, skill-building, resources, career exposure, influence, barriers, and attitudes. Throughout the process of data analysis, the research team met weekly to discuss additions to the codebook and resolve any discrepancies. Finally, the research team met for a white boarding session to identify the central themes, unifying the axial coding categories. We grouped our data according to the central themes and refined them as necessary.

Figure 13: **Qualitative Participant Count**

Population	Count
Low-wage workers	29
Community college students	32
Career coaches	7

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions

DISCUSSION 1: YOUR CAREER JOURNEY

[rationale- to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences about their career journey]

1. [ACTIVITY 1] To kick things off, we'd like you to take a few minutes to reflect on your journey so far. On the paper in front of you, draw your career journey. This might look like a chart, a map, puzzle or timeline, or something completely different. Provide the definition of career on the anchor chart - "A career is more than just a job; it encompasses your long-term professional journey, including the roles you take on, the skills you develop, and the goals you achieve over time."

   You might start with your first full- or part-time job or education experience–it's really up to you, and there's no right or wrong way to do this. As you draw, you might mark some key points like:

   – Job or role change (promotions, switches, layoff);
   – education or training
   – Any moments that stand out as particularly important or challenging

   You don't have to include every single job or decision- just the ones that matter most to you. We'll take 10 minutes for this.

   – What did this experience make you realize about your career?

2. What does a 'good job' look like to you? How if at all, has this changed over time?

3. For workers: What skills have helped you the most in your career journey? How have they helped you?

   – Where/how did you learn these skills?

   And then *For students*: What does a 'good job' look like to you? How if at all, has this changed over time?

For students:

For question 1, we asked students to mark key points like, "Internships, job or role change (promotions, switches, layoff); starting or completing school, a class, or training program," in place of "job or role changes" and "education or training."

For question 2, we asked, "Let's talk about your decision to go to college. What led you to take that step? Describe what was going on at the time you made the decision.

For question 3, we asked, "How does being a student fit into the rest of your life- work, family, or other responsibilities?"

The fourth question we asked, "What does a 'good job' look like to you? How if at all, has this changed over time?"

DISCUSSION 2: SEARCH STRATEGY

[rationale- to elicit participants' experiences and behaviors in acquiring career information and using it in their decision-making]

Now, let's talk about how you gather information or advice when you're trying to make a career move.

4. Where do you usually go to find information about job opportunities, wages, skills, and qualifications? Why?
   – How often can you easily find the information you're looking for?
   – Where, if at all, do you share job information?

5. IF NOT ADDRESSED: Have you ever looked for career information online? If so, where did you look and why? Was the information helpful?

6. Tell me about the time you made your last big career decision. How did you go about it?

7. Tell me about someone who advised you on a career decision.

8. Have you ever asked someone to recommend you for a job at their company? Who did you ask and what was that experience like?

9. How has your current or past employer supported your career journey or career development, if at all?

- How has your current or past manager impacted your career journey?

For students:

In place of question 9, we asked, "How does salary factor into your decision-making?"

DISCUSSION 3: IDEAL JOB

[rationale- to elicit participants' ideas about what an ideal career means to them]

Now that we've talked about where you've been and where you are now, let's move on to where you would like to be. What would your ideal job look like?

There is no right or wrong answer here. We're just interested in what you envision for yourself. Maybe you already have it, maybe it's 10 years away. [ACTIVITY 2] Take 5-7 minutes to add to your current career journey on the sheet of paper.

10. Describe your ideal job. What does it look like (i.e. wage, company, schedule) and why is it your ideal?
    - Think back a few years. How has your ideal job/ career changed over time?
    - How–if at all– is your ideal job different from your current job?
11. Are there any steps you've already taken — or are currently taking — to move in that direction?
12. What would help you move forward in your career right now–either toward your ideal career or otherwise?

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

For Workers

DISCUSSION 1: EARLY ADULTHOOD BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCES

1. Thinking about your upbringing, what led you to the job you have today?
2. Are there certain people who were particularly influential in leading you to the job you have today?
3. Coming out of high school, did you have any initial ideas, if at all, about what you wanted from a job?
4. What factors did you take into consideration when deciding whether to pursue college or a different form of training or education?
5. What skills have been the most important to your job and at what points in your life did you learn those skills (i.e. technical, soft, management, etc.) ?

SECTION 2: EXPLORING OPTIONS & GATHERING INFORMATION

6. Tell me about a time you made a significant decision about your career (or education).
7. Whose perspective do you listen to when you make those decisions? (Could be family, larger community pressure, peers, teachers or counselors)
8. When you're trying to figure out what career moves, where do you typically go to find information or advice? How did you find them?
    a. Of all the resources you've used, which ones were most helpful? Why?
    b. What kind of information do you wish you had access to help you make career decisions?
9. Have you ever had an experience where a job you were interested in turned out to be different from what you expected? What happened?

SECTION 3: FUTURE OUTLOOK

10. What do you enjoy or appreciate most about your current role?
    a. What makes it feel worthwhile?
    b. What would you miss if you left this job?
11. Looking ahead, what does your ideal career look like to you?
    a. Responsibilities? Work setting? Schedule? Salary?
    b. Do you see yourself taking any steps towards this career? How?
12. What are some of the biggest challenges or barriers you anticipate in pursuing your desired career?
13. Take a minute to reflect on this conversation. Is there anything else that we overlooked in this conversation that you personally feel was immensely impactful on your career journey?
    a. Do you have any takeaways on your career journey that surprised you?
    b. Is there anything that would influence your future decisions?

For Students

SECTION 1: YOUR ACADEMIC & CAREER JOURNEY

1. What initially led you to enroll in community college?
2. How would you describe your academic journey so far? Have there been any particular courses, projects, or experiences that have stood out to you?
3. How has your field of study impacted how you view your career path, if at all?
4. What skills do you feel you've gained or strengthened since starting community college? Can you think of a specific instance where you've used that skill, either in your classes or elsewhere?

SECTION 2: EXPLORING OPTIONS & GATHERING INFORMATION

5. Where do you typically go to find career information or advice? Which resources have been most helpful and why?

6. Have you ever found career information through your current program?

7. Who are the key people you talk to when you're thinking about your future career (e.g., family, friends, professors, advisors)? How do their perspectives influence you?

8. Tell me about a time you made a significant decision about your education or career. How did you go about making that decision? What were the main factors you considered, and were there any moments of uncertainty?

9. Have you ever had an experience where a job or career path you were interested in turned out to be different from what you expected? What happened?

10. Do you feel like your community college has provided you with resources or guidance to explore career options?

SECTION 3: FUTURE ASPIRATIONS & SUPPORT

11. Looking ahead, what would your ideal job provide you (i.e. salary, impact, flexibility, advancement)?

12. How confident are you that your program will provide the information to help you secure your ideal job?
    a. If yes, tell me how.
    b. If not, what information do you need to secure the job?

13. If you haven't shared already, what are some of the biggest barriers you face or anticipate facing in getting the job?

Appendix 4: Example Focus Group Worksheet

Name

Focus Group Reflection Sheet

Thank you for participating! This sheet is designed to help you reflect on your career experiences and goals. There are no right or wrong answers- just your story. We will collect these worksheets at the end of the session.

YOUR CAREER JOURNEY

Draw your career journey. Start with your first full- or part-time job or education experience– there's no right or wrong way to do this. As you draw, mark key points including:

- Job or role change (promotions, switches, layoff)
- Education or training
- Major career decisions or turning points
- Times when you actively sought out information, career advice, or connections
- Any moments that stand out as particularly important, or challenging

You don't have to include every single job or decision- just the ones that matter most to you.

IDEAL JOB

What does your ideal job look like? Add to your current career journey below or on the first exercise.

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