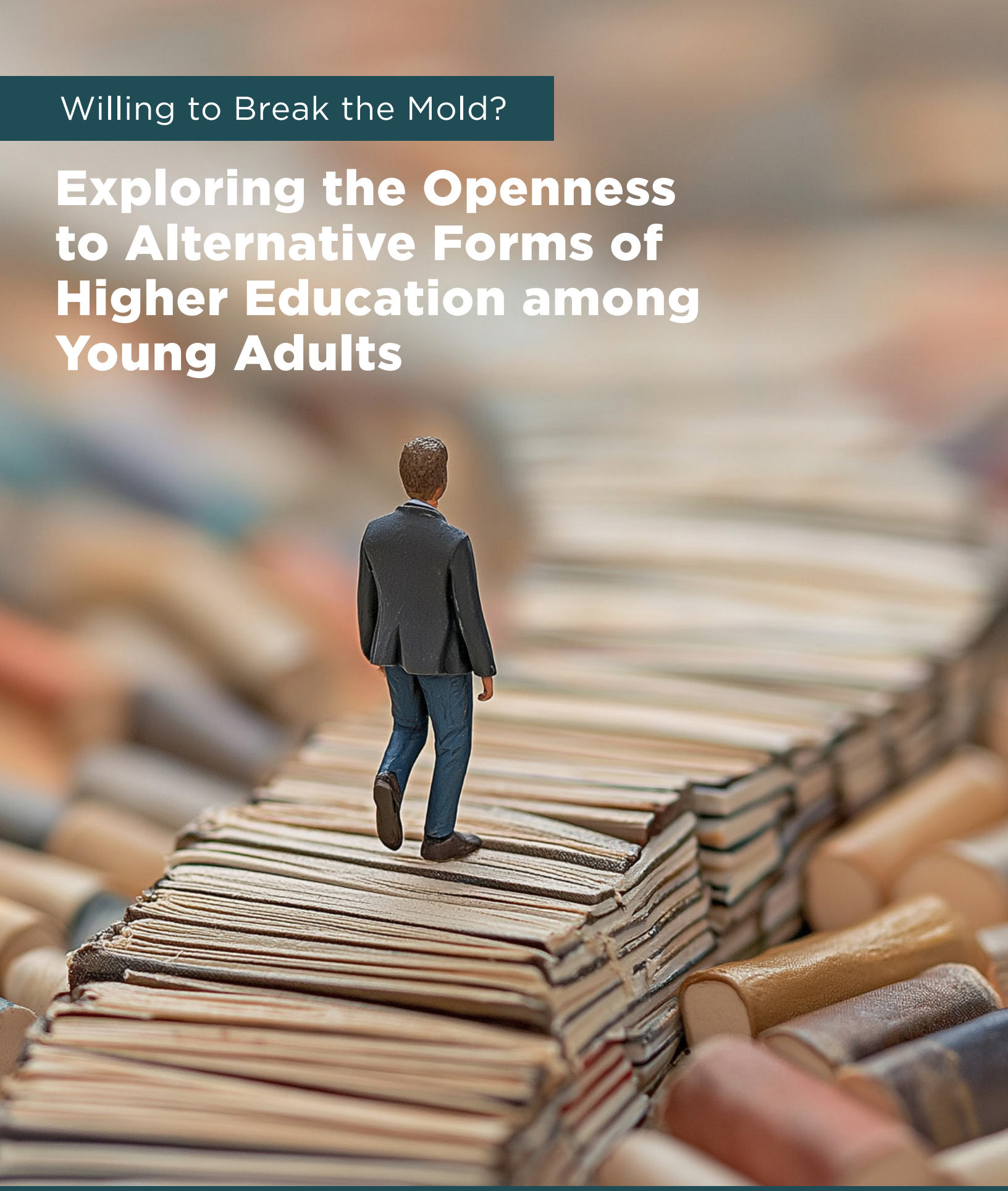
Willing to Break the Mold?

Exploring the Openness to Alternative Forms of Higher Education among Young Adults



July 2025 | Dr. Richard DeMartino | Dr. Raffaella Borasi | Dr. Nathan F. Harris | Dr. Sean Hansen

SPONSOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research included in this report was made possible through generous funding by the Charles Koch Foundation. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Charles Koch Foundation.

REPORT SUMMARY AUTHORS

Dr. Richard DeMartino (Principal Investigator), Dr. Raffaella Borasi (Co-Principal Investigator), Dr. Nathan F. Harris, and Dr. Sean Hansen.

For more information about this study or the team's alternative approaches to higher education research stream, please contact Richard DeMartino, rdemartino@saunders.rit.edu.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

This summary report is a component of a larger research initiative exploring alternative approaches to higher education. These efforts explore the perceptions, motivations, and other factors influencing critical stakeholders including traditional students (young adults), their influencers (e.g., high schools, family, friends, social media, etc.), innovative institutions, and employers. The research team is composed of faculty from the Rochester Institute of Technology's Saunders College of Business (SCB) and University Studies Division, the University of Rochester's Warner School of Education, and the new Golisano Institute of Business and Entrepreneurship. Team members include:

Richard DeMartino, Sean Hansen, Kenan Gular, Ettore Spadafora, and Raj Murthy from the SCB; James Hall from RIT's Universities Studies Division; Raffaella Borasi, Dave Miller, and Bonnie Rubenstein from the UR's Warner School of Education; and Nate Harris and Ian Mortimer from the Golisano Institute of Business and Entrepreneurship. Bhuvish Mehta and Sarah Yarger provided invaluable assistance as Graduate Assistants.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a 2023 exploratory study examining postsecondary expectations of young adults, with a particular focus on their openness to alternative higher education approaches. With the increased cost and growing disenchantment among some segments of the population of traditional degrees, this study sought to understand high school students' and their influencers' changing perceptions of existing and emergent alternative models of postsecondary education and training.

The study adopted a qualitative research design and focused primarily on students from middle to lower-income backgrounds reflective of the 75% of US high school students, intentionally excluding upper-middle-class students with high social capital. Interviews were conducted with students considering or intending to attend college after graduation. The open-ended interview format encouraged participants to express their views in their own words with a team of researchers guiding the conversations to uncover factors and causes.

The findings suggest that while many students express uncertainty or dissatisfaction with traditional college pathways, their awareness of specific alternative pathways is limited. As a result, openness towards alternatives stems more from discontent with current options than from recognition of distinct alternatives.

Key insights include the following:

- Students demonstrate limited understanding of both traditional college and alternative educational pathways.
- College costs and potential debt emerge as students' primary concern, yet few demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of educational costs, strategies to limit costs, or foundational concepts, such as return on investment (ROI).
- Pandemic online learning experiences created strong resistance to fully online programs, challenging assumptions about "digital natives" and their readiness for virtual instruction.
- Parents, teachers, friends, and (to a lesser extent) counselors, all play unique roles in shaping students' post-secondary perceptions. Interestingly, awareness of alternative options among these influencer groups is also limited.
- Students with Career Technical Education (CTE) experiences, those attending specialized career-focused institutions, and some homeschoolers show greater awareness of post-secondary options

Based on these insights, we recommend initiatives to expand awareness of alternative postsecondary pathways, improve financial understanding of the total costs that accompany attending college, enhance guidance systems in K-12 schools, and address negative perceptions of online learning. Effective implementation of these recommendations could help bridge the gap between student dissatisfaction with traditional options and their limited awareness of viable alternatives.

Table of Contents

Introduction and Research Context

The higher education landscape is evolving rapidly, with new models emerging that challenge traditional four-year degree programs. Rising tuition costs, growing student debt, and the uncertainty of attending college in general (i.e., lack of completion, lower ROI degrees, etc.) have prompted students, families, and policymakers to question whether college, in its conventional form, is always the best path forward.

At the same time, rapid workforce technology changes and advancements have fostered a growing ecosystem of alternative postsecondary options – such as online certificates, micro-credentials, apprenticeships, and bootcamps. These alternatives often promise greater flexibility, lower cost, and faster time-to-employment. The ability of these options to be delivered through traditional, online (synchronous & asynchronous) and blended modalities have only increased their reach. Despite their growth, these options have been employed by older segments of the population, adult learners seeking increased earnings, career/skill advancement, career transitions, or just to avoid professional obsolescence. With the advent of new technologies such as AI, it seems likely that these options will continue to grow.

Little research has explored the extent to which high school students are aware of and open to these alternative educational pathways and approaches. Our study aimed to fill this gap by examining high school students' understanding of post-secondary education options across four key dimensions:

1. **Student awareness of post-secondary education options;**
2. **Perceptions of traditional college costs and student debt;**
3. **Perceptions about online learning and their experiences with remote learning during the pandemic; and**
4. **How influencers impact students' post-secondary decisions.**

This white paper details our findings and offers recommendations for education stakeholders seeking to better serve students exploring post-secondary education pathways. It represents the "consumer side" of our broader research project, with future work planned to explore the "educational institution side" through examination of business model development and strategic bottlenecks in new de-bundled higher education services.

Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative Approach

The study utilized a grounded theory methodology (GTM) approach, exploring the lived experiences of students and school counselors. This methodology allowed us to uncover nuanced insights that surveys could not capture, providing deeper understanding of students' knowledge, concerns, and decision-making processes related to post-secondary options.

Sampling Strategy

We specifically targeted the lower 75% of income groups, working with high schools in middle- and lower-income urban, rural, and suburban communities, as well as career-focused institutions and homeschooling communities. Our primary focus was on students in 11th and 12th grades (16-18 years old) in different school contexts. This intentional focus allowed us to examine populations that may have less access to comprehensive college counseling and information about higher education options. The research identified most interview candidates by partnering with school counselors in high schools that served families in distinct middle, lower and mixed middle-to-lower-income communities. Two of these public high schools explicitly served urban, minority, lower-income communities, two served suburban, middle-to-lower-middle-income communities, another two smaller high schools served the rural middle-to lower-middle-income communities. One of the urban, minority-serving high schools was well known for emphasizing career training, life counseling and developing human capital. This unique high school allowed for contrasts when compared with the more traditional urban-serving high school. In addition to these high schools, the study included a Career Technical Education (CTE) institution, which served various regional schools providing applied technical career and trade education, and a cohort of homeschoolers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved 45–60-minute semi-structured interviews with a common set of questions while probing for elaboration to responses. Rather than testing hypotheses, this qualitative method allowed the research team to inductively identify emerging themes across transcripts. A key element of conducting the interviews was creating and facilitating a space for young adults to offer their perceptions in their own words, which, at times, required interviewers to embrace silence and allow respondents to formulate their thoughts. A total of 80 students, 5 parents and 20 counselors were interviewed. Analysis included qualitative coding of interview transcripts with constant comparison across multiple rounds of coding in line with the GTM model.[1]

1. Additionally, 28 academic innovators were interviewed to provide insights into emergent non-traditional approaches to higher education available to young adults. While these interviews were conducted for contextual reasons, they provided considerable insight into options and awareness of programs available to young adults. This report does not disclose the content of these conversations.

Defining Key Concepts

For the purposes of this study, "alternative approaches" encompassed any post-secondary training path outside traditional four-year degree programs, including:

1. Academic/workforce credentials (certificates, micro-programs, bootcamps, etc.) including stackable credentials;
2. Vocational training;
3. Apprenticeships;
4. Formal or Informal training programs; and
5. Military service (as training or funding source).

From a practical perspective, the study sought to uncover all post-secondary options students and their influencers were proposing, discussion and considering.

We defined "openness" by assessing students' knowledge, awareness, preferences, and satisfaction with current options, allowing us to understand not just their stated preferences but their underlying reasons and influences.

Key Findings

1. Student Awareness of Post-Secondary Options

Low Understanding of College.

Despite intentions to pursue college, most students had very superficial understanding of what college entails, causing significant stress and anxiety about their futures.

> **One student candidly admitted, "I'm not sure to be honest. I haven't really looked into it much. I'm still trying to find a school I would like. I honestly just try and find schools right now."**

Another expressed: *"That's why I'm scared to go to college because there's so many things and I don't know what to pick, and what's going to help me, and what career I might do."* Significant misconceptions about educational and professional pathways were widespread among respondents, and this lack of awareness led to considerable stress about students' ability to make informed decisions about college and flourish in the world beyond high school.

Even Lower Awareness of Alternatives

While the understanding of college was limited, awareness of other post-secondary education alternatives was even more limited. In general, students had virtually no substantive knowledge of alternative pathways. As students expressed, *"I actually never even knew some companies actually do that, so that's something new" and*

> **"No, that' just something I haven't (considered). Not like my counselors or any teacher have been telling me, 'Hey, you should try this.'"**

When asked about alternatives to college, one student responded:

"I don't know. I really don't have an alternative, and I never thought about that. I don't have an alternative. I don't know what I'd do. A bunch of people go into the trades."

Anecdotal Sources of Knowledge

With respect to influencing students' perceptions of postsecondary options, teachers and extended family were more prominent sources of information than school counselors. The corresponding information was largely anecdotal, based on personal experience rather than data:

"So usually I would ask my teachers... I talked to my teachers about it and look on the Internet."

"I talk to my uncle, specifically, because he's got many degrees in college. So, he's the one that went the furthest in college so far. So, that's the person I go to."

"I mainly talk to my teachers. I honestly, I'm not even going to lie to you, I really do not talk to my counselors like that. Then I feel like my school needs more counselors with the amount of students that we have, like I emailed and I didn't get a response until like one or two weeks later."

Counter Cases: High Awareness

Despite the generalized ignorance with respect to postsecondary pathways, our data includes a few counter-cases – students with high levels of awareness and concrete planning. These were generally from three groups:

1. Students with Career Technical Education (CTE) experiences
2. Students at alternative advising models (e.g., Eagle Academy)
3. Homeschooling students

Students in CTE programs appeared well informed about professional credentials and other academic non-degree credentials. The interviews suggested that CTE students did not clearly distinguish between "trades", "experiential learning", and "traditional college credit". Students had options of gaining transferable community college credit for many of the technical skills they learned. Receiving this college credit, however, was their choice.

Students from a particular urban public high school serving the lower income minority community (well-known for career development training) were equally well versed in both traditional and non-traditional post-secondary education. As one student explained:

"Really, at the [our high school], success is defined by setting a worthy goal and attaining it. So, we do encourage trade schools here. There are a lot of kids who are interested in trade school. There are a lot of kids who are interested in going directly into the workforce. There are a lot of people who are interested in going to college... So, they [the staff] try not to pressure kids into going to college."

Home schoolers also demonstrated a basic knowledge of both traditional higher education and academic alternative pathways. This knowledge appeared linked to multiple interactions displayed among homeschoolers and community colleges. In their efforts to round out their high

school education, many students had enrolled or researched community college credit-based courses and certificates. For example, one homeschooled noted:

"Yes, a lot of the community colleges, and even some of the four-year colleges, give trade certificates for things like that. Just a couple of months of learning and you can have your certificate. And I thought a pharmacy tech [credential], learning about that would be great if I ever became a psychiatrist because their job is prescribing medicine for mental illnesses and whatnot."

These counter-cases suggest that exposure to CTE instruction dramatically increases awareness of post-secondary options, and that intensive advising models that foster reflective planning for the future increase student awareness of diverse postsecondary pathways.

2. Student Perceptions of College Costs and Debt

The Dominant Concern: Cost and Debt

Students consistently cited costs as the most significant worry that could impede college attendance:

> **"I've had it in my head since ... middle school. I don't want to go into crippling debt."**
>
> **"I've heard stories of people who have student debt for the next 30 years."**

When asked about the greatest impediment to college, responses were consistently focused on finances: *"Money, definitely money. It's just so expensive"* and *"If anything, it would just be money."* Students frequently expressed anxiety: *"Yeah. I start thinking about things like that [costs and debt] all the time"* and *"[I] think about cost a lot, because thousands of dollars does seem a lot."*

Student after student cited the cost of college—especially the burden of student loans—as their top concern. While a few students said their families would assist financially, most were acutely aware of the risks of long-term debt and its potential to limit future freedom.

Limited Understanding of College Costs

Respondents demonstrated a general lack of knowledge regarding college costs. Most conflated cost and debt. High understanding was associated with a capability to classify and compare institutional categories (e.g., state vs. private, community vs. four-year colleges, in-state vs. out-of-state tuition) and then compare within a category. The highest level of cost sophistication was perceived as understanding some aspects of the educational return on investment.

Several students expressed their confusion: *"I don't know much about [college costs]. I know you could probably do fundraising"* and *"I don't understand all these things you have to do financially."* Others admitted: *"I haven't really looked at many of the costs yet. I just look for*

the programs right now" and *"I'm not really too sure about cost because I don't have the best grasp on how much money it is or what is a good price to pay for college."* One student asked: *"I'm not sure how it traditionally goes, but don't most parents pay for students' college?"* Despite their concern for cost, students lacked basic knowledge about how college pricing works. Few understood the differences between in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, public vs. private institutions, or the nature of financial aid.

Lack of ROI Thinking

Interestingly, only one student across dozens interviewed articulated a return on investment (ROI) framework—comparing degree costs (and career tracks) to long-term earnings. Most students did not consider how specific program choice or major selection might influence financial outcomes. This made decision-making feel overwhelming and fraught with risk. The lack of ROI specificity (i.e., a linkage between a specific career pathway with the cost of the degree) was somewhat expected given the lack of formative thinking and experience with career choices – but the generic sophistication levels were very low. Most students only thought about cost and debt and not about the impact of earning a degree or entering a career pathway to service the debt.

Cost Containment Strategies

Students described several cost-containment strategies:

1. Scholarships – The pursuit of scholarships was by far the most cited strategy. Here again, responses suggested significant confusion:

"I am thinking a lot about scholarships or like the opportunity to win those or apply for those to reduce the cost for college. And I'm not really too sure about a lot of resources, because I know there's a lot of different ones that you can go to, but a lot of them aren't super clear to me." Many viewed scholarships as magical discounts with unclear rules and believed *"working through school"* was a catch-all solution.

2. 2+2 Programs – A small number of students expressed interest in going to a community college for two years and then transferring to a 4-year college, while living at home. Students who sought 2+2 programs tended to mirror their parents and did not reference high school counselors or teachers: *"I've considered going to a community college for two and then transferring my credits and stuff, so I don't have to pay a lot for something when I can get it close to home and so much cheaper and then transferring to a bigger school."*

3. Working First – Some respondents discussed working in high school or during college to afford college: *"Right now, I don't have a job yet. I am planning on getting one. That might help me save for college for right now. College debt, how I'm going to manage schooling and keeping a job?"*

4. Skip or Delay – Perceptions of high cost/debt led some to consider skipping or delaying college: *"When I would talk to my friends about college and stuff, they're like, 'Well, no, I'm probably not going to go at least not right out of high school because I don't have the money for that.' I've said that too."*

Parental Education and Career Uncertainty

A notable distinction emerged between students with different levels of social capital:

- Students whose parents lacked bachelor's degrees were more reluctant to attend college without knowing their career goals first: *"That's why I'm scared to go to college because once I go there... what career I might do. What happens if I'm just like, 'Oh look, I signed up. I paid.' Then what happens if I drop out?"* These students perceived college as a means to a job—not a space for exploration.

- Students whose parents had bachelor's degrees were more likely to attend college even without a clear career path: *"I don't really have a set career, but.... I want to figure that out as I do the degree."* These students often saw college as a place to figure things out.

Sources of Knowledge About Costs

Students' perceptions of cost and debt were primarily informed by parents, close family, and broader societal discourse:

- **Family Experiences**

> **"My sister is still paying back student loans. My dad finished his student loans a little while ago, but to me, I didn't want that to be an added bill."**

"Because my mom had student debt along with my aunt, I think, and for a long time they were prevented from going on vacations and seeing places they wanted to see until they had paid a good chunk of it off... Even then they were still limited with what they could do."

- **Societal Discourses on College Debt:** *"My parents never really talked about their college experiences, but I've got the internet." "You hear about it all the time, the cost of college, taking out loans. People are paying off student loans up until they've got their own established life."*

3. Online Learning and the Impact of the Pandemic

Since many alternatives to college involve online learning, we thought it would be important to better understand students' perceptions about online learning – especially given their experiences with remote learning during the pandemic. More specifically, our study pursued the following research questions:

1. How open are current HS students to engage in online post-secondary programs?
2. How did experiences with remote learning during the pandemic affect their openness?
3. What "online learning skills and mindsets" will HS students need to effectively engage in online post-secondary programs?

Widespread Rejection of Online-Only Programs

We had hoped that having experienced online learning during the pandemic would increase high school students' openness to online post-secondary options - but found exactly the opposite. Most of the students we interviewed said that they would not consider programs that are fully online – although they would be open to taking some courses online. These feelings were especially strong about subjects like math and science. We were especially surprised by the strength of this resistance – as shown by this quote:

"No, flat out no. I was really only able to take the virtual classes here because I had a support system with my family. They were right next to me, guiding me through. But if I go away, I definitely couldn't take that."

There were, however, some that saw the benefit of taking some courses online: *"I would rather go back to school full time than be completely remote, but I like a mix."*

Influence of Negative Experiences with Remote Learning During the Pandemic

Over 75% of students reported negative feelings about their experience of online learning during the pandemic – and some felt very strongly about it:

> **"Personally I really hated remote. I do not like it."**
>
> **"I was always a pretty good student. I failed a class for the first time last year. And not only that, but I failed multiple and I just found that it kind of killed my motivation in general... The online stuff definitely didn't work."**

"I have tried to take AP chemistry online, and with two days a week in school, it was awful. I hate it. I can't do online."

Although a few students said the online modality worked for them, they were a small minority.

Causes of Negative Perceptions

It is important to realize that these negative feelings had more to do with HOW students experienced online learning during the pandemic, than with online learning per se. Several factors related to the pandemic could be identified in how students described their prior experiences with online learning:

- **Poor quality of online instruction:** *"A lot of the teachers were still like learning how to do it." "For certain courses there was either no homework on remote days or... it was just busywork."*
- **Lack of accountability:** *"It wasn't really good because no one could hold students accountable." "When you take away consequences, and you take away a student's ability to reach out to a teacher, it definitely stunts the growth of their educational career."*
- **Feeling of isolation:** *"When I was here all day, it just like I was stuck. I'm always want to go out or something like that. I just didn't like the online thing."*
- **Effects of overall trauma:** *"It felt like being personally attacked by everything. I don't know, it was a really difficult thing."*

Most of these factors will not be there in well-designed post-secondary online programs – yet these experiences during the pandemic greatly influenced students' perceptions about the quality and value of online learning and will be difficult to dispel.

Digital Natives Lacking Online Learning Skills

Another interesting finding was that, despite being "digital natives," most HS students lacked the basic online learning skills and mindsets needed to be successful in online programs. Most notable was the lack of self-regulation – as several students acknowledged they had difficulty being organized and meeting deadlines, which is critical for any asynchronous learning:

"I wasn't very organized." "I personally have a procrastination issue." "I can get really distracted or discouraged. So, it would be a little hard sometimes to stay on top of everything."

While several students reported self-directed learning using YouTube/Google for their hobbies and/or personal interests, few saw the relevance of these practices for online learning in formal school settings:

"If I wanted to do something I didn't know how to do it, I'd go on YouTube and look it up. I couldn't find a video, I'd go on some other website, look it up… Which only works if people are motivated enough."

In sum, our study suggests that high school students that went through the pandemic have an overwhelming reluctance to consider online-only post-secondary programs. It also suggests that this reluctance has a lot to do with their experience of online learning in unique circumstances during the pandemic, which is NOT representative of high-quality online programs – yet it is unlikely that these students will appreciate the difference! Finally, our findings challenge the expectation that current high school students will be able to handle online learning just because they are "digital natives" – on the contrary, few of them currently have the self-regulation skills and online learning strategies needed to be successful.

These considerations have important implications for innovators and providers of alternative post-secondary programs, and also for how we should prepare students in K-12 schools. We will return to these considerations at the end of this presentation.

4. Influencers Shaping Post-Secondary Perceptions

The research not only sought to examine high school student perceptions of alternative approaches to college, but also how they were influenced by individuals, schools and society. Interviews with high school counselors and parents – in addition to students – sought to clarify the people and the narratives that were influencing the educational plans of these young adults.

Parents – Anchoring Broad Parameters

Parents often anchored overarching perceptions of postsecondary options. Most students mentioned parents promoting two facets of postsecondary planning:

- **Attending College** – Encouraging students to attend college – either because parents did not (or could not) attend college or because parents considered that having gone to college has been essential to their own success.

- **Minimizing Cost of Attendance** – Encouraging students to avoid incurring substantial debt (e.g., advocating for in-state public institutions).

For some students, other family members (e.g., grandparents, older siblings, cousins) underscored attending college and minimizing college costs. Some students received more specific advice from their parents (e.g., visiting or applying to specific colleges). One student mentioned: *"We talk about how you have to be realistic about going to the right college… get as much scholarships as you can, you can choose as far as you want, but to be realistic, you should aim for like New York area."*

Teachers – Tailoring Individual Advice

Teachers informed awareness of post-secondary education options by offering individualized advice, reflecting rich teacher-student interactions. Students who mentioned their teachers noted two forms of advice:

- **Recommending Specific Majors** – Suggesting academic programs or majors that align with the student's specific interest in a subject (e.g., science).

- **Recommending Specific Institutions** – Describing personal experiences at alma maters, creating a sense of familiarity and attainability with certain colleges and universities.

One student explained the role of his math teacher:

"My AP Calculus teacher was telling me, 'You want to be an engineer?' I was like, 'Yes.' So, he was like, 'This class will definitely push you forward'… So, I was like, 'Hey… then I'll take the class.'"

Counselors – Providing Information in a Chaotic Environment

Some students reported that counselors provided basic information about postsecondary planning (e.g., encouraging students to apply for financial aid). Few students, however, met one-on-one with counselors to discuss academic and career planning. In these instances, counselors provided two types of information:

- **Developing Plans of Study** – Recommending specific high school courses that prepare students for college (e.g., advanced math courses).

- **Offering Application Advice** – Providing advice about college applications (e.g., writing personal statements) and financial aid (e.g., applying for scholarships).

Several students observed that counselors emphasized more traditional college pathways. Interestingly, many students implied that teachers played a more influential and active role than counselors helping them consider post-high school options.

High school counselor interviews provided explanatory insights into counselor career efforts. These individuals reported a shift in emphasis, over the past few years, toward addressing student socioemotional needs; counselors often underscored how addressing urgent student mental health challenges dominates their schedules. This included school responses

to COVID-19 such as when implementing emergency remote teaching often disrupted academic and career planning programming. High counselor-to-student ratios also have made painful tradeoffs between core responsibilities necessary.

Friends - Offering Social Space for Sensemaking

Several student interviews suggested that friends and peers offered a social space to discuss post-secondary planning. Students described discussing postsecondary options with friends for three reasons:

- **Exchanging Information** – Students exchange specific information about college applications as well as academic and career pathways with peers.
- **Declaring Intentions** – Students discuss their postsecondary plans with peers, making sense of emerging academic and career options while seeking validation from friends.
- **Expressing Concerns** – Students disclose concerns and anxieties about going to college with peers, including social life after high school, seeking encouragement from friends.

"[My friends] push me the most. Every single time we're struggling, we're like 'We're going to walk that stage in June. We're going to yell at ourselves, 'We did it, We did it!' But we just motivate each other. That's the best thing I can possibly say is that I have the best people on my side to support me."

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

1 Stimulate Awareness and Knowledge of Alternative Postsecondary Pathways

- Develop programs targeting K-12 students and their families that explore alternative postsecondary education pathways. Example: Expand awareness of existing Career and Technical Education opportunities
- Develop programs targeting K-12 students and their families that explore the benefits and costs of different postsecondary pathways (i.e., ROI of pathways). Example: Integrate ROI assessments of postsecondary choices into financial literacy curriculum
- Consider how programs focusing on enhancing awareness could be tailored for the home-schooling community

2 Reimagine School-Based Advising Models

- Develop professional development programming for K-12 teachers and counselors that enhance awareness of alternative postsecondary pathways and ROI knowledge about college benefits and costs over time
- Consider bifurcated counselor roles, where dedicated and specialized postsecondary advisors are buffered and separated from the urgent and overwhelming everyday realities of supporting student mental health
- Provide upskilling for counselors on non-traditional postsecondary pathways

3 Build Financial Literacy and ROI Capacity

- Integrate financial literacy into high school economics or math curricula, using real college pricing tools and earnings calculators
- Help students understand the true costs and benefits of different education paths
- Teach ROI concepts early to equip students to make confident, cost-informed decisions
- Develop community workshops that invite extended family members who influence student decisions about postsecondary education

4 Repair Online Learning's Reputation

- Develop programs that support high schools in designing and delivering online courses to expand firsthand exposure to online learning. Example: Establish competency with online learning as a high school graduation requirement
- Counteract negative perceptions of online learning stemming from experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Develop programs that assist alternative postsecondary innovators in diagnosing and developing the online learning skills of students. Example: Address or "make up" proficiency gaps created during the COVID-19 pandemic

5 Target High-Potential "Lead User" Segments

- Focus recruitment and support efforts on homeschoolers, CTE students, and those without college-educated parents but showing openness to alternatives – as these students are most likely to benefit from and champion emerging postsecondary models

6 Leverage Peer Networks and Social Proof

- Establish alumni networks connecting high school students with recent graduates who chose alternative pathways
- Create peer mentorship programs pairing students interested in alternatives with those already succeeding in non-traditional postsecondary routes
- Develop social media campaigns featuring young professionals who succeeded through alternative forms of post-secondary education

Implications and Conclusions

Our findings suggest several key implications for understanding high school students' openness to alternative higher education approaches:

Potential Openness

- Openness exists primarily due to dissatisfaction with traditional options rather than awareness of specific alternatives
- The alignment of discontent and alternative awareness is crucial

Potential Lead Users

- Students with career-oriented education backgrounds
- Students with parents without four-year degrees who lack a defined career path
- Homeschoolers who have taken community college or other outside credit

Barriers

- Information asymmetries
- Limited guidance and support
- Concerns about employer acceptance

The Urgency of Action

This research reveals a critical window of opportunity. Students are primed for change – they're dissatisfied with traditional options and concerned about costs – but they lack the knowledge and support systems to navigate alternatives. Without intervention, this dissatisfaction may lead to suboptimal choices such as reluctant enrollment in traditional programs that don't serve them well or avoidance of post-secondary education altogether.

The Innovation Imperative

Alternative post-secondary education providers confront a marketing and trust-building challenge that extends beyond traditional customer acquisition. They must simultaneously educate their market, overcome pandemic-induced skepticism about online learning, and prove their value in a landscape where "college" remains the default social expectation. Success will require not just innovative educational products, but innovative approaches to awareness-building and community engagement.

A Call for Ecosystem Thinking

No single stakeholder can address this challenge – or seize this opportunity – alone. K-12 schools need better guidance systems, alternative providers need better marketing strategies, employers need to signal their acceptance of diverse credentials, and families need better financial literacy. The solution requires coordinated action across the entire post-secondary ecosystem.

The Path Forward

The students in this study are not rejecting education – they're seeking education that makes sense for their lives, finances, and career goals. By making alternative pathways more visible, trusted, and accessible, we can transform student dissatisfaction into informed decision-making. The question is not whether alternative higher education will grow, but whether it will grow in ways that truly serve the students who need it most.

This study reveals that high school students' openness to alternative higher education pathways is shaped less by enthusiasm for innovation and more by dissatisfaction with current options. Many feel overwhelmed by cost, under-informed about alternatives, and underprepared to succeed in online environments.

Our research reveals a complex landscape where students' dissatisfaction with traditional college pathways creates potential openness to alternatives, yet this openness is hindered by limited awareness, poor understanding of costs and benefits, inadequate guidance, and negative perceptions of online learning.

By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, educators, policymakers, and alternative education providers can help bridge the gap between student dissatisfaction and awareness of viable options. The future of post-secondary education likely lies in creating more transparent, affordable, and career-connected pathways that address students' legitimate concerns while providing them with the skills and knowledge needed for successful careers and lives.

Now is the time to ensure those pathways are not just available—but visible, trusted, and navigable.

For more information about this study or the team's other higher education reform research, please contact Dr. Richard DeMartino, rdemartino@saunders.rit.edu