



QUESTION THE QUO[®]

**Insights from Underserved
Student Populations**

FEBRUARY 2023



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INTRODUCTION

ECMC Group, with support from ECMC Foundation, developed the Question The Quo public awareness campaign in 2020 in an effort to address persistent issues surrounding teens' exposure to postsecondary pathways beyond four-year college and empower high school students to explore their options and choose the education path that is right for them. Since the campaign launch, ECMC Group has conducted five national surveys of Generation Z high school students ages 14 to 18 to garner insights about their future education and career plans.

In late 2022, ECMC Group set out to capture data specifically from traditionally underserved student populations to better understand their unique perspectives and challenges. With this goal in mind, ECMC Group worked with VICE Media to field a survey of high school students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) communities in October 2022. To further expand the data set, ECMC Group and VICE Media conducted 10 focus groups of low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students in high school, in college or on a path other than college in November 2022.

The data indicates that while these students are generally confident in their futures, high schoolers from underserved communities both want and need additional guidance and resources to make informed decisions about their postsecondary education journeys.

Only 45% believe education after high school is necessary, illustrating a significant risk for continued underrepresentation of low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students in postsecondary education. At the same time, 83% feel pressure—often self-directed—to pursue four-year degrees despite fewer than half considering that path.

The latest survey found that the most important factor for underserved students in deciding what to do after high school is the ability to meet their most basic needs. Teens in underserved groups want to know that they will be able to feed themselves, have access to safe housing, be able to care for their physical and mental health and be able to understand and manage their finances.

Included in this paper are key findings from ECMC Group's October 2022 survey and November 2022 focus groups that illustrate the need and opportunity to provide more targeted and practical guidance to low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students.



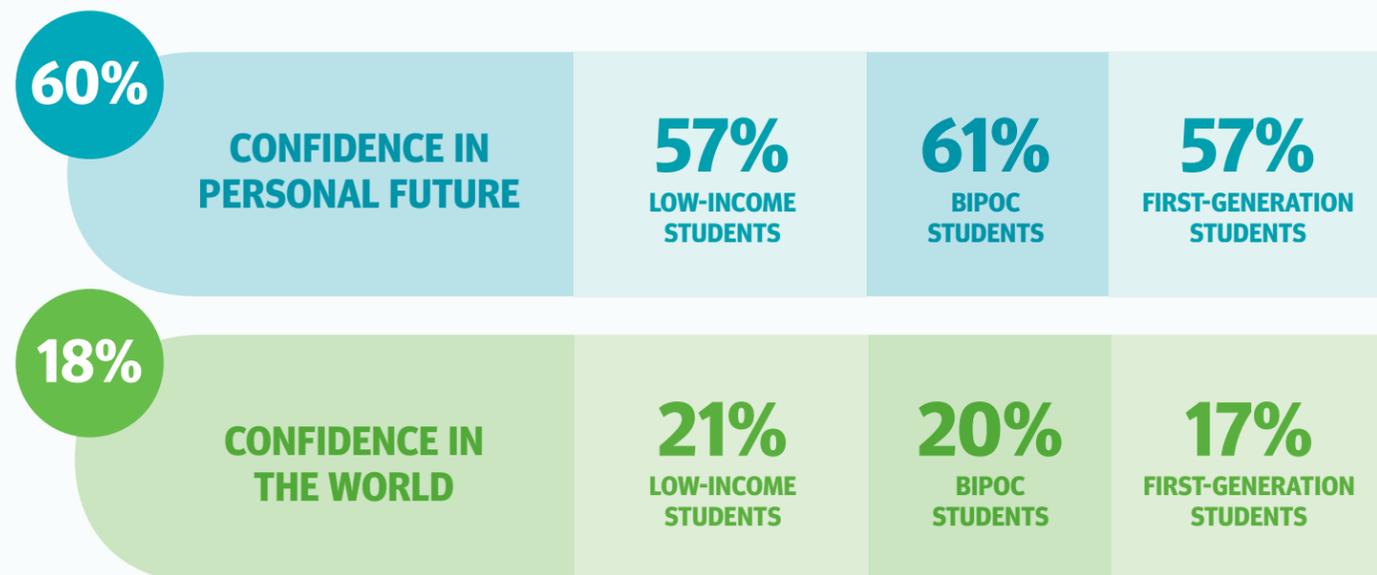
EDUCATION OUTLOOK FOR UNDERSERVED STUDENTS



The sixth Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey found that the postsecondary education outlook for Gen Z teens from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC populations is dependent upon their personal circumstances and unique definition of success. High schoolers across the board have a sense of confidence that is unchanged by demographics or circumstances, but their personal sense of confidence significantly outweighs their confidence in the world around them (Figure 1).

The way these high school students view success reflects their personal perspectives, and they have a mindset focused on achieving happiness and a stress-free life. College students with similar backgrounds who participated in ECMC Group focus groups have maintained this mindset as they continued into and through postsecondary education.

FIGURE 1: Gen Z teens from underserved populations feel a stronger sense of confidence in themselves than they do in the world around them.



“As long as you can provide for your family and you’re happy, then that’s success. Not like what the Internet portrays it to be like. You don’t have to have a bunch of money or a bunch of cars or fancy things...I want to live a worry-free life.”

—High school student, low-income¹



“Career-wise to be successful [I] would...have to be happy with my job. I’ve never been... certain on what my passions are, so if I could just find something that I love and I can just wake up and be happy going to every day, then that would be money.”

—College student, first-generation¹

Pressure to Follow a Linear Path

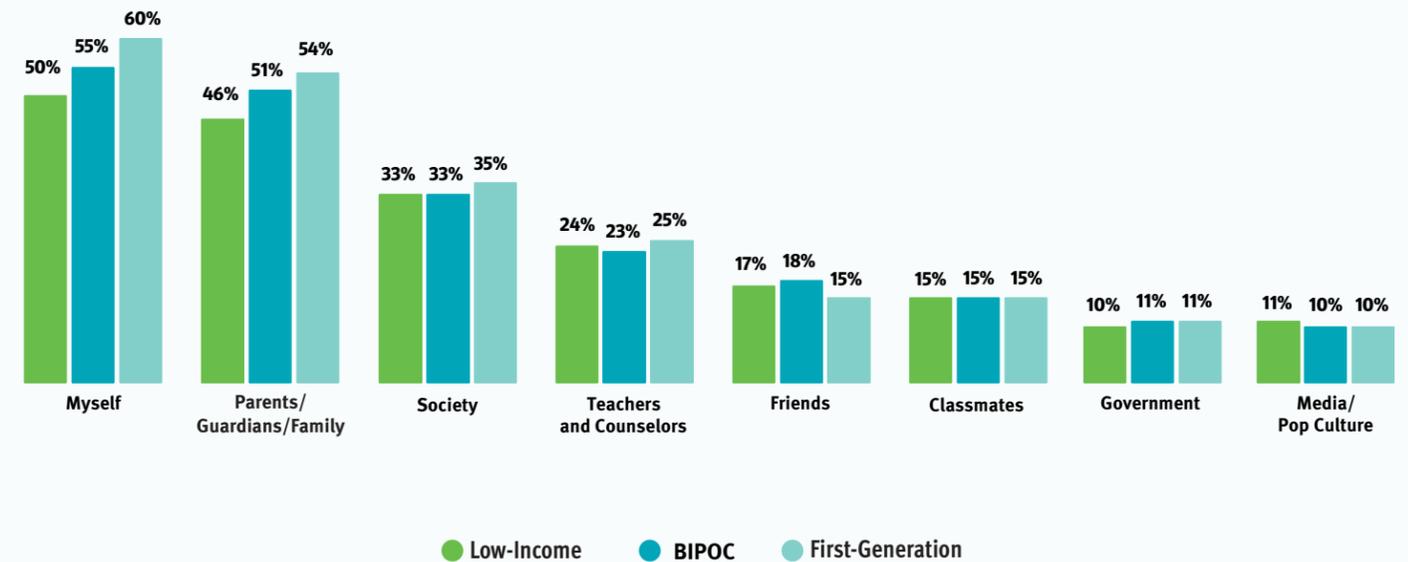
Students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC backgrounds see obtaining ongoing education as part of their future, but the concept is somewhat vague. Despite 82% of these students reporting that they plan to pursue postsecondary education at some point, **only 45% said that they believe education beyond high school is necessary.** At a time when the value of college is being called into question,² these numbers indicate a lack of awareness about the connection between postsecondary education and future

success and the possibility of continued gaps in educational attainment between underserved students and their more advantaged peers in the future.

At the same time, 83% of students from underserved communities report that they feel pressure to pursue a four-year degree. Of that group, a majority report that the main sources of pressure come from themselves (55%), parents/guardians/family (50%), society (35%) or teachers/counselors (24%) at their high schools (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Teens from underserved populations report feeling pressure to attend four-year college, which is often self-driven.

Sources of Pressure to Pursue Four-Year College



Their self-pressure acts as motivation to drive them to achieve their goals and make others proud.



“I’m also getting pressure from...myself. I was pressuring myself to do literally everything perfect.”

—High school student, BIPOC¹



“For me, most of my pressure does come from myself and kind of just really wanting to prove a point, I guess, to just everyone, myself and my family.”

—High school student, low-income¹

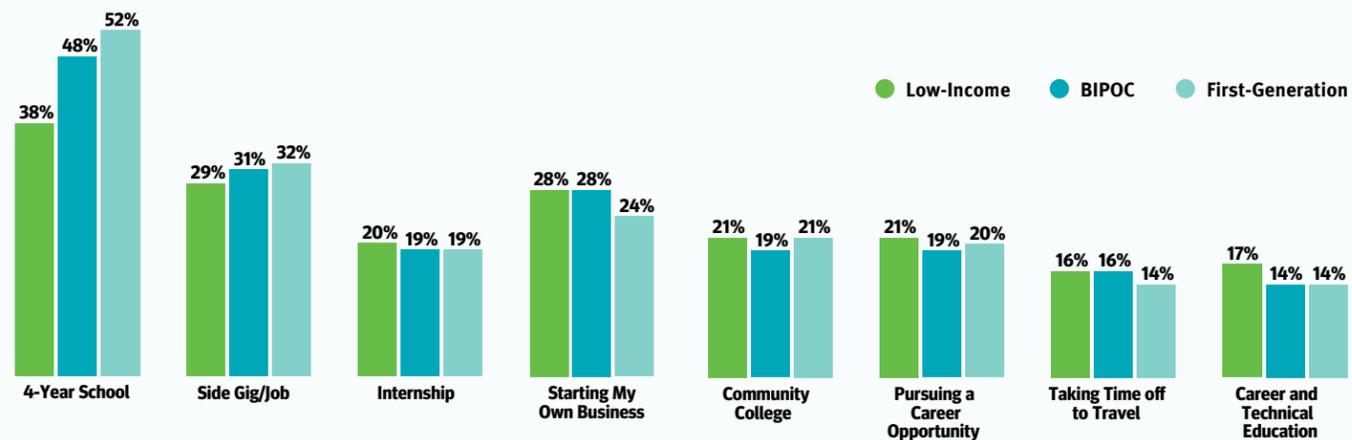
NO CLEAR PATH FORWARD



Gen Z teens from low-income, first-generation or BIPOC backgrounds report that they plan to pursue education at some point in their future, and the decision about what is next weighs on them. Despite significant pressure to pursue four-year degrees, **fewer than half are considering attending a four-year college (47%), and more than half believe they can be successful without a four-year degree (57%) and are open to other options (53%) (Figure 3).**

FIGURE 3: Less than half of teens from underserved populations are considering attending a four-year college.

Postsecondary Pathways Underserved Students Are Considering



The Big Concern

While students from underserved communities demonstrate a desire for education beyond high school, a concerning trend has emerged. With fewer than half (45%) believing education after high school is necessary, it begs the question, are these students receiving information that illustrates the value of education in ways that make sense to them and will there be continued gaps in educational attainment, economic achievement and social mobility for students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC backgrounds?

For these students, the data illustrates that there is not a clear connection between education attainment and future career and personal success.

As they look to their future, education and careers are top-of-mind despite an unclear path forward. They are constantly thinking about the next step, highlighting their need for additional information about career exploration opportunities.

Nine in 10 low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students think about their education and career path beyond high school weekly or more, and 1 in 2 think about it every single day. They

feel a clear urgency to think about their career but do not have a defined path in mind. They see education as less of an opportunity to explore career options and instead as a means to an end—with the goal of ultimately obtaining a career.

- 8 in 10** think it's important to have their career plan determined by high school graduation
- 7 in 10** have already started exploring a future career path
- 6 in 10** have a career path in mind right now



“What I’m looking forward to the most is being able to just start a career and being happy in the field that I choose and being able to provide for a family.”

—High school student, first-generation*

CHOOSING A POSTSECONDARY PATH



Students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC communities look to a variety of sources for guidance and support. Many say they get or feel support from their family, school and media (such as websites and the news) for what's next. Even as they turn to these resources for help, while many feel supported, they do not have the information they need to make educated decisions.



“In my high school, we had one counselor to manage...a thousand students...so it’s kind of hard to develop a relationship with them.”

—College student, low-income*



“A lot of the teachers don’t like to get too involved in whatever a kid is planning to do... But I feel like maybe if they showed...I guess more of an interest or more like trying to push the kid the right way, it would help.”

—High school student, first-generation*

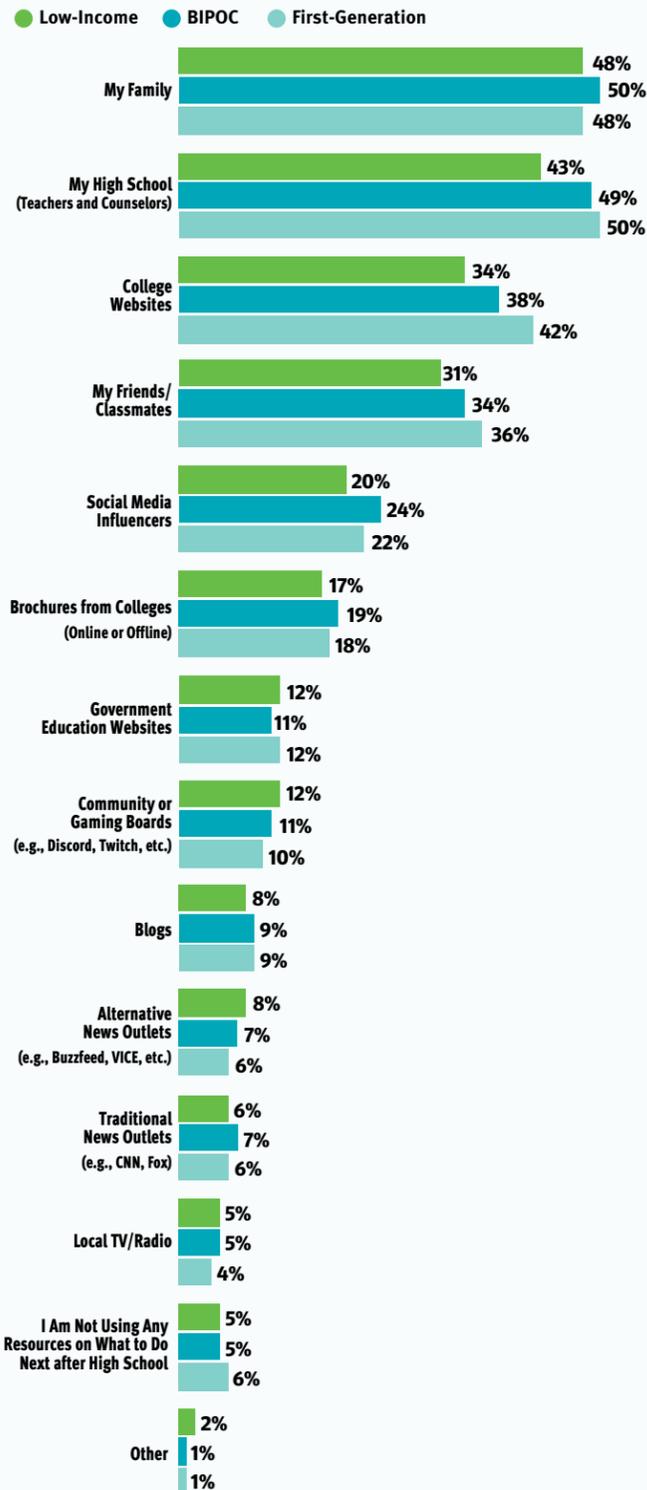


“[They] should help you identify a career path, identify a job path or an education path for you. There [are] some people who don’t just get it instantly. People need... hands-on help.”

—High school student, first-generation*

FIGURE 4: Gen Z students from underserved populations turn to their families, their high schools and college websites most often for help in planning their future.

Resources Underserved Students Turn to When Making a Post-High School Decision



Despite these students having a clear desire to explore career options during high school, most low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students report that schools do not provide structured or formal guidance on decisions about their education and career paths (Figure 4). Students from low-income households report the least access to resources from their high schools to explore career possibilities.

- 4 in 10 students from underserved communities say their schools offer college fairs
- 3 in 10 students from underserved communities say their schools offer questionnaires/tests that help them uncover their interests
- 4 in 10 students from underserved communities say their schools offer a program that explores potential career paths
- 4 in 10 students from underserved communities say their schools offer classes for career exploration

They also report a general lack of access to information about managing life in the real world, expressing a desire for education more connected to the adult challenges they will face when they complete their high school education.

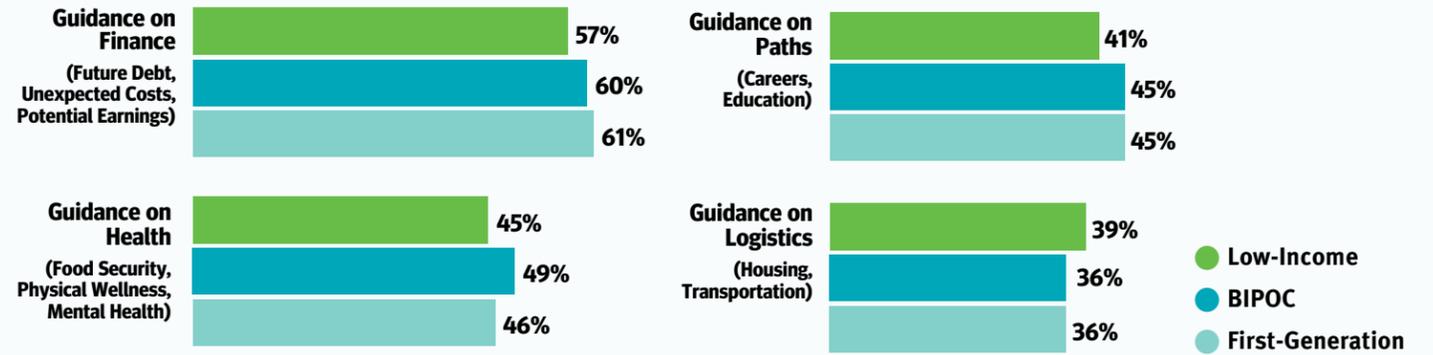
“I feel like they don’t teach you the...basic skills of adulting because they focus so much on the academic skills...like doing your taxes, things like that...I have no idea how to even approach some of those things.”
—High school student, low-income³

“I had to pay [for] things and become an adult. I didn’t really learn that, and I thought... something that I was going to be learning more about was finances because, in my adult life, I deal with a lot of finances.”
—Career path follower (did not attend college)³

Seeking Guidance

As today’s teens—especially those from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC communities—approach the decision about their post-high school education, they continue to seek guidance from their high schools on a host of critical elements, from finances to logistics such as housing. Most do not feel that they have all the information they need to make a decision; **91% want more guidance from their high school about their path beyond graduation (Figure 5).**

FIGURE 5: Students are looking for a range of guidance from their high school. Areas Where Underserved Students Would Like More Help from Their High Schools



However, the ultimate decision for underserved students is based on their ability to meet their most basic needs. **They rank their ability to meet their basic needs such as food and housing security on the same level as they do finances and career planning (Figure 6).**

FIGURE 6: Students from underserved backgrounds prioritize their basic needs when determining a path after high school.

What Is Most Important in Deciding What to Do after High School for Underserved Students?³



Teens continue to have major questions about their financial wellbeing. With the question about whether education beyond high school is necessary, students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC backgrounds do not understand the trade-off in earning potential between pursuing education and pursuing a career immediately after high school. However, long-term earning potential is a goal for these students, with 71% saying they would choose a career where they do not make a lot of money right away but make more over a lifetime.

As they look to their future, students from underserved communities still have many questions about money and finances that have yet to be answered.

More than half (56%) worry about how they will pay for college, despite many having a plan for how they will pay.

How Students Plan to Pay For Their Education after High School

- 48% plan to apply for scholarships
- 31% plan to apply for student loans
- 28% plan to use their own savings
- 25% plan to apply for grants (such as Pell)
- 21% plan to have family pay for their education
- 9% say they don’t know

Even with a plan, their worries about paying for postsecondary education, including both direct and indirect expenses, and future earning potential remain.

Below are the top areas where low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students have questions:

1. How much I might earn depending on the path I take (38%)
2. What jobs I should consider to help with payments while at school (37%)
3. How long it will take to pay back student loans (34%)
4. Average costs I’ll have to pay outside of tuition (33%)

Ultimately, wealth attainment, cost (particularly for first-generation students), career paths and mental health have the largest impact on their choice and decision-making process.



MEETING THE NEEDS OF UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

The survey found that underserved students do not believe a four-year degree guarantees that they will be successful. They want to forge their own way forward and feel that they can change their path and still achieve success.

As they look to their future, students from underserved communities see an ideal post-high school education setting focused on efficiency, skills development and real-world experiences (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: More than half of teens from underserved populations believe their ideal education pathway would require less than four years to complete, and many feel comfortable following a different path.

Teens Want Efficient Pathways to Careers

55%

said post-high school education should be less than four years

Because of the pandemic,

34%

of teens feel more comfortable following a path other than four-year college

Teens Value Skill-Based Education

58%

say a skill-based (e.g., trade skills, nursing, STEM, etc.) education makes sense in today's world

33%

say post-high school education should only include subjects directly related to their program/major

Teens Want Their Education to Involve Real-World Experiences

7 in 10

say it's important to have internships/apprenticeships for their future career/job field in a post-high school education



"I think the government should spend more money on education because we see all these schools...using old textbooks or teachers aren't getting paid enough. And yet we see over there, like in the military, the government just...blows hundreds of millions of dollars on fighter jets and aircraft carriers...do we really need more missiles or more textbooks?"

—High school student, BIPOC*

Students from underserved backgrounds also see education as an ongoing experience over their lifetime. More than half (59%) say they plan to learn throughout their life, and 48% want more formal education throughout their career journey. Shorter, career-connected education experiences also make sense for them, with 32% saying education would be better in several short experiences (several months to two years) over a lifetime versus one longer experience (four years).

Expecting Outside Support

Students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC communities expect assistance from the public and private sectors alike.

91%

Believe the government should help by...

1. Providing additional money to pay off students loans
2. Subsidizing/paying for education

86%

Believe businesses should help by...

1. Providing formal education
2. Providing additional money to pay off student loans



IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR UNDERSERVED STUDENTS



The results of this survey and focus groups indicate a clear need to provide more focused, practical guidance about careers and education pathways to students from historically underserved backgrounds.

Gen Z Is Driven to be Successful but Needs a Better Roadmap

Students from underserved communities align with their peers when it comes to self-confidence, drive and their goal of achieving happiness. They get support from their friends and family and feel a sense of responsibility to achieve that success. Before they determine “what’s after high school?” students want to better understand the skills they need for the real world and be assured their needs will be met when they choose a pathway. **Guidance on finances and basic needs (food and housing security, transportation, mental health) can help build inroads with these students to help them feel prepared for life after high school and better equip them to choose a postsecondary pathway that meets their needs.**

Gen Z Needs Guidance on Health, Finances and Career Direction

Low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students are focused on stress-free success stemming from good mental health, earning potential and career path identification. The major questions they have range from how to take care of themselves to the financial support available to them and the career paths that exist and are open to them. **They require support and guidance to answer questions about their financial capabilities and career pathways via channels that are most accessible to them, including digital content, one-on-one sessions or workshops with schools or counselors, to provide the direction they need.**

Gen Z Wants Education That Delivers Skill, Efficiency and Real-World Experience

The survey illustrates that there are obstacles impacting historically underserved students and causing them to view postsecondary education with uncertainty and trepidation. They are approaching four-year degrees with skepticism and are looking for ways to determine a career path that fits their needs before they graduate from high school. They believe the ideal post-high school education experience would involve a curriculum designed to provide students with a faster (less than four years) learning track that provides technical skills and internship experiences, giving them the flexibility to choose what they do and do not want to learn. They view education as part of their lifelong journey. **To best support them, schools, government and business stakeholders must adopt elements of their ideal education structure.**

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND SAMPLE

These findings reflect a multi-method research project to better understand the perspectives of students in underserved communities in conversations about education and careers.

Survey

Online Survey Fielded in Partnership with VICE Media

-  **October**
11-25, 2022
-  **High school students**
(ages 14-18)
-  **1,020 Responses**

Demographic Breakout⁴

-  **48%** First-generation
-  **49%** Low-income
-  **61%** BIPOC

Focus Groups

10 Focus Groups Conducted in Partnership with VICE Media

-  **November**
1-13, 2022
-  **75 Total participants**

Demographic Breakout

-  **43%** High school (ages 16-19)
 - Low-income students in high school
 - BIPOC students in high school
 - First-generation students in high school
 - Mixed group of low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students in high school
-  **57%** Post-high school (ages 18-21)
 - Low-income students attending postsecondary education
 - BIPOC students attending postsecondary education
 - First-generation students attending postsecondary education
 - Mixed group of low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students attending postsecondary education
 - Mixed group of low-income, first-generation and BIPOC students pursuing a path other than postsecondary education

¹ Focus group participant.
² VICE Media/ECMC Group Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey January 2022.
³ More than one answer allowed for this question.
⁴ Demographic groups are not mutually exclusive. One student may fall into multiple categories.

FIGURES 1-7 DATA SOURCED FROM: VICE + ECMC Group Survey and Focus Groups (Wave 6 Survey, LI/BIPOC/FIRST GEN, N=1,020) October-November 2022



QUESTION THE QUO

ENCOURAGING TEENS TO QUESTION THE QUO

The survey and focus groups of underserved student populations were conducted as part of ECMC Group's Question The Quo public awareness campaign that empowers high school students and beyond to take the postsecondary education and career path that is right for them. ECMC Group developed the Question The Quo campaign in 2020 to encourage learners to explore the various education and career options available to them and help them understand that there are many ways to achieve education and career success.

www.questionthequo.org

ECMC Group

ABOUT ECMC GROUP

ECMC Group is a nonprofit corporation focused on helping students succeed by creating, providing and investing in innovative educational opportunities. Headquartered in Minneapolis, ECMC Group and its family of companies are focused on advancing educational opportunities through financial tools and services; support for postsecondary access, persistence and completion; and impactful and mission-aligned funding for innovative programs to help students achieve their academic and professional goals and address the future of work.

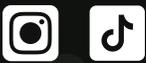
www.ecmcgroup.org



ABOUT VICE MEDIA

VICE Media is the world's largest independent youth media company. ECMC Group partnered with VICE Media to conduct focus groups and a national survey of high school students from low-income, first-generation and BIPOC backgrounds as they consider their future education and career paths. The online survey and virtual focus groups were administered by VICE Media in October and November 2022.

www.vicemediagroup.com/insights



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