

Career Choice Report
Understanding Education as a Career Choice for NC Research Men Research Study
Walton Family Foundation

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College and Career Readiness

College and career readiness refers to the set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that enable students to succeed not only in postsecondary education but also in their chosen careers. According to Conley (2012), readiness encompasses four key components: *think* (cognitive strategies such as problem-solving and critical analysis), *know* (foundational content knowledge across core subjects), *act* (learning skills and techniques such as time management and persistence), and *go* (navigational skills for managing transitions to college and the workforce). Together, these dimensions provide students with the tools necessary for both academic and career success. The concept emphasizes that being “ready” involves more than meeting academic benchmarks—it also requires self-regulation, adaptability, and goal-directed behavior. Students who have access to readiness resources and experiences are often better able to transfer their college learning into practical skills that support long-term professional success.

Career Pathways

While Conley’s framework defines what it means to be college and career ready, programs like the Career Technical Education (CTE) program and its career pathways represent the learning opportunities that schools provide to students. Very structured, hands-on learning experiences that allow students to learn more about real-world careers. The CTE program is organized into 14 main clusters and 72 sub clusters that dive into areas such as Advanced

Manufacturing, Health Science, Education, Digital Technology, and Agriculture. Each cluster is designed to bridge the gap between education and workforce.

This program plays a vital role in supporting students in their post-high school journey, whether it involves military service, entering the workforce, or pursuing postsecondary education. It allows students to explore and plan by discovering their interests, developing employable skills, and understanding the education or training required for different career paths. According to Falco & Steen (2018), early exposure to CTE programs that students receive can lead to higher rates of student engagement, participation, and motivation. It also assists students in answering questions they may have regarding their futures, such as what options are available, where they could see themselves in the future, and what impact they want to have and what career pathway will fulfill that for them.

However, not all students receive equal access to career technical education programs. Many of the reasons behind this being lack of funding, staff, and resources and with previous research we know that outside of programs like CTE, students decision-making processes are influenced by parents, peers, teachers, and counselors (Huerta et al., 2018). Of these influences the school counselor is trained to build a strong foundational relationship with students by assisting them with academic achievement, career planning, and social emotional learning. Counselors are trained through the American School Counselor Association.

School counselors play a vital role in assisting students with career and professional development by helping them understand their options, make informed decisions, and identify their interests, strengths, and areas for growth. To guide their practice, school counselors are trained to use the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Model, which is organized around mindset and behavior standards. The mindset standards focus on the attitudes and beliefs

that influence student achievement and success. These standards encourage students to develop self-awareness, engage in social-emotional learning, build self-confidence, maintain a positive attitude toward education and career pathways, strive for excellence, and recognize the importance of postsecondary education for long-term success. The behavior standards, in contrast, identify the specific actions students demonstrate to support these mindsets. These include developing social skills, practicing effective communication, strengthening problem-solving abilities, and managing behavior appropriately. By implementing the ASCA model in their daily practices, school counselors are better equipped to help students navigate their educational experiences and prepare for future college and career opportunities.

Social Capital in Career Exploration and Decision Making

A frequently used but often underrecognized theoretical currency that people use in everyday life is social capital. Social capital, as explained by Claridge (2018), explains the importance of relationships and social interactions beyond an economic lens; it proposes that social networks are an asset with value that give way to productive benefits and valuable resources between people (Boat et al., 202; Claridge, 2018;). Doing your neighbor a favor rather than charging for a service may result in feelings of gratitude and respect that then grows into exchanging favors and ideas with one another. It is “what allows humans to collaborate, coordinate, and coexist” (Claridge, 2018, p. 5) to build the foundation that society is built upon. It then can expand from the individual level to social groups, formal organizations, and even nations. Because social capital is something humans intuitively understand—we recognize early that sharing physical tasks and study tips in school can prove mutually beneficial, both emotionally and practically—it is worth discussing how college counselors, mentors, and other

professionals build off of this framework to expose young people to new careers and bolster their decision-making skills.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) reports that students learn best in supportive, inclusive environments, which is the axis with which it centers its standards around (2021). This includes encouraging school counselors to collaborate with families, educators, mentors and community organizations that promote growth opportunities for students and break down the barriers that hinder students from reaching their highest potential. This growing network of support systems and knowledgeable people is what encapsulates access to information that grants the student the ability to investigate and assess new and advantageous opportunities (Portes, 1998; Salisbury et al., 2011). For example, research shows that students are more likely to participate in study abroad in college if they have family members who place higher importance on postsecondary education, especially if they have studied abroad themselves (Perkins, 2020; Salisbury et al., 2011). In discussion about how HBCUs can better affirm attending students, Williams et al. (2022) expressed the importance of having to undo the psychological damage that comes with having a marginalized identity so that students of color feel empowered to succeed as students and eventually transition into the career landscape. The connections made through their relationships with faculty as well as the peers they meet through their majors or residence halls further builds upon this social capital and further shapes students' *habitus* in a way that better prepares them to engage with new opportunities (Lingo, 2019).

The importance of the skills gained through these connections and advancements gained through social capital can be explained through entry-level hiring trends; research on labor markets contend that virtually all employers, including low-wage markets, seek hard and soft skills to reflect basic work-readiness in prospective employees (Stoll, 2010). Employers will

typically use certain credentials that signal these skills since they are not always directly observable at the time of hire. Further, young people use the connections garnered from networking and mentorship programming to secure their first jobs and gain access to more intrinsically fulfilling work in young adulthood (Boat et al., 2021). Therefore, the encouragement of gaining new skills and exploring educational opportunities can open up new career pathways for young people as they move through school and into the workforce (Stoll, 2010, Boat et al., 2021).

Role of Patriarchy

The role of patriarchy in shaping young men's educational and career pathways is complex. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views patriarchy not only as a system that privileges men but also as one that constrains them. As the British Educational Research Association (BERA) explains, "teachers themselves play a significant role in the reproduction of the patriarchal narrative" and often perceive boys as "more difficult to teach than girls" (BERA 2023). This framing suggests that societal expectations tied to masculinity such as discouraging vulnerability or emotional expression can lead boys to disengage from learning environments. In this sense, patriarchy harms both genders while it maintains structural power imbalances, it also imposes restrictive behavioral norms that influence boys' academic motivation and achievement.

Research related to young men and their post-secondary and career pathways

National data reinforce this gendered educational divide. The Pew Research Center (2023) reports that "men make up 44% of young college students today, down from 47% in 2011," and that "men after high school represent only 42% of students ages 18 to 24 at four-year schools." These figures represent roughly one million fewer young men in college than a decade

ago. Scholars suggest multiple explanations for men's stronger representation in the workforce immediately after high school, perceptions that higher education lacks financial payoff, and gendered social pressures that encourage independence over prolonged schooling. Such patterns highlight how masculinity norms, valuing self-reliance, physical work, and such earnings can steer young men away from traditional academic pathways and into shorter-term or trade-based careers.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) has been identified as a promising route to reconnect disengaged young men with education and employment. The MDRC notes that “CTE offers an avenue for young men who have fallen behind academically and economically and who may as a result suffer at many points along their life courses,” and that “male students who engage in CTE have better educational and employment outcomes than those who do not” (MDRC). CTE programs provide hands-on learning that aligns with many male students’ interests and can translate directly into labor market opportunities. Yet, the MDRC cautions that outcomes vary depending on program quality and labor demand, warning that weak implementation may reinforce gendered occupational segregation instead of broadening opportunities.

Lack of Research on this Topic & Why

Despite these insights, researchers consistently note gaps in understanding young men’s post-secondary pathways. Systemic data limitations often obscure the nuances of men’s transitions from high school to work or training, while outdated gender frameworks continue to treat masculinity as static rather than socially constructed. Social and cultural factors such as class expectations, regional economics, and peer influence also remain under-examined. As BERA (2023) argues, reframing boys “not only as agents of patriarchy but also as those

constrained by it” is crucial to understanding how patriarchal pressures shape educational and career outcomes. To address these issues, future research should integrate intersectional data collection, longitudinal analysis, and critical gender theory to capture the full complexity of men’s evolving post-secondary and career trajectories.

Career Pathway Experiences for Men of Color & Other Underrepresented Groups

Support Networks and Interventions

To take advantage of social capital in practice, we can examine the benefits that mentorship programs have had on young people. Research already largely suggests that strong peer relationships and networks positively correlate with academic achievement and successful school-to-career transitions among young people in general (Boat et al., 2021). It empowers people to seek help, stirs feelings of social responsibility and civic engagement, and encourages engagement with job search activity. This value amplifies among young adults of color, as it allows for growth within the intersection of race and life advancement through modeling of pro-academic behavior and support of ethnic identity development. Latinx college students, for example, utilized their social capital to build additional support services such as scholarships and mentor programs for their peers on their college campuses that later trickled down to subsequent generations of students. Butler et al. (2013) highlight the importance of network and mentorship support for young African American men in particular due to their heightened presence of at-risk factors such as backgrounds of poverty, poor living conditions, violence, drugs, and inadequate education. The authors emphasize that mentoring has, for many years, proven to be the best tool for working with African American male youth as a way to provide them with a safe climate away from violence, help garner parental involvement in their lives, cultivate self-esteem and psychological well-being, and place high regard on academic achievement and success. This is

mirrored by Zell's study on the Brother2Brother peer group program for African American college males in Chicago (2011), where participation demonstrated strengthened competence in overcoming stereotypes, low self-confidence, and underachievement. The program also instilled positive habits in the students that could carry on into the workplace, such as pressure to attend class on time, dressing professionally, and increased confidence to engage with those unfamiliar to them.

Barriers to Support

According to Mee, Silverman, and Hartzell (2024) Black male teacher candidates often encounter limitations or representation and lack of mentorship during their secondary education that discourages them from pursuing a teaching career. Study shows that young men of color often receive minimal support from educators or counselors, leaving them with not much understanding of navigating career pathways. Other factors that affect young men are socioeconomic status and first-generation status as well as cultural stereotypes and social comparisons. These barriers and lack of support defer the male students from showing interest and pursuing a postsecondary education.

Background Information for the Research Study

The purpose of this research was to address the factors influencing the choices North Carolina Research Triangle boys and young men make on pursuing education degrees and careers. The Research Triangle region is home to approximately 2.4 million people, and it encompasses the cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. The area features 12 colleges and universities, including nationally renowned community colleges, and highly ranked Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The area sees an influx of domestic and international talent for the local workforce, including the education sector. It is an area encompassing high research activity within the public and private sector and some of the fastest growing companies in the

world. The Research Triangle has an above average educational attainment rate (Eanes, 2023); for example, Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill rank in the top ten most educated cities in the nation (McCann, 2025). Moreover, 38% of North Carolina youth, aged 18 – 24, enroll in postsecondary or higher education, placing the state 27th among all states in 2023, including those students who study education (Postsecondary, 2023). It is noteworthy to mention that one in every ten (10.3%) North Carolina 16-24-year-olds were not in school or working in 2023, placing the state 25th among all states for opportunity youth (AIR, 2024; Opportunity Youth, 2023). Furthermore, there is currently a shortage of certified teachers for NC's P-12 educational system and therefore a crisis in classrooms (Waid, 2025). The factors contributing to the shortage include low pay, reduced enrollment in educator preparation programs, high attrition rates, increased demand, and funding challenges (Waid, 2025). Understanding career choices of North Carolina Research Triangle men can lead to interventions that only close the gap for a skilled education workforce but also diversify the teacher pipeline. Based on our present review of the literature, existing research regarding education career choices is not situated in North Carolina's Research Triangle, and Research Triangle literature does not address education careers.

This research examines the experiences of a diverse assemblage of boys and men. It is important to consider the unique experiences of subgroups of youth. For example, there is currently a crisis among Black men matriculating and graduating from postsecondary and higher education institutions. Research has shown that the enrollment of Black men in higher education comprise 4.6% or a little over 850,000 of the 18.6 million students enrolled in colleges and universities (Sanders, 2024). Moreover, Black men are reported to have the lowest retention rates of all groups (McMickens et al., 2024; Palmer et al., 2025). While college retention and persistence have been a noticeable concern for Black students attending predominantly White

Institutions (PWIs) due to institutional racism (Brooms & Davis, 2017; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Harper & Davis, 2016), historically Black colleges and universities have been praised for the nurturing and supportive climate they provide to Black students in general and Black men specifically (Johnson & Winfield, 2022; McMickens, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). However, much like their PWI counterparts, HBCUs are grappling with ways to promote college access and success among Black male youth. For example, in 1976, Black men accounted for 38% of the students enrolled at HBCUs. In 2005, enrollment among Black men at HBCUs dropped to 31%, and as of 2022, Black male enrollment made up 26% of all students at HBCUs (Windsor & Reeves, 2024). According to the American Institute of Black Men and Boys, the share of non-Black students at HBCUs is about equal to the enrollment of Black male youth enrolled at these institutions (Windsor & Reeves, 2024). Furthermore, Black male teachers made up 1.3% of all teachers in K-12 public schools in 2021 (Taie & Lewis, 2022). These explanatory factors articulate why it is vital to disaggregate male youth experiences and consider the unique conditions affecting sub populations of male youth to devise tailored interventions.

Having an in-depth understanding of the barriers that Research Triangle youth face and the support they need for their careers will affect their abilities to live full lives as adults and be productive citizens. This research fills a void in scholarship on this critical topic, and it is informed by the Understanding Education as a Career Choice for NC Research Men Research Study (UECCNCRTMS), which examines career pathway barriers for fifteen Triangle men.

Because little is known about education career choice among males in the Triangle, interviews were used as a method for collecting context-specific information. We employed a qualitative, quasi-longitudinal approach and interviewed four high school students for a current perspective, five college students for a recent reflection, and six working educators for a longer-

term reflection. The principal investigator has submitted a book proposal that is currently under review. The forthcoming book will cover the following topics on the Understanding Education as a Career Choice for NC Research Men Research Study:

- Background information of participants such as high school attended and experiences, early experiences with career development, perceptions of career pathways, and accessibility and engagement of supportive services along the career pathway journey
- Discuss how faculty, administrators, and other institutional agents could use the information presented in the book to better support youth experiencing barriers to postsecondary and higher education.
- Findings from the high school participant data
- Findings from the undergraduate participant data
- Findings from the P-12 educator participant data
- Comparisons across the three set of data
- Implications for Research and Practice
- Resources that Aid in Improving the Career Pathways for Triangle Boys and Men

We anticipate that the book will be published by the September 2026 convening.

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