

CAREER CHOICE REPORT: POSTSECONDARY & CAREER PATHWAYS FOR YOUNG MEN

Existing Data on Postsecondary
and Career Pathways for Young
Men in the Research Triangle

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The goal of this report is to provide context for ongoing research supported by the Walton Family Foundation and the ACPA Foundation to inform efforts that expand access, opportunity, and persistence in education and career pathways of young men.

OBJECTIVE

The Career Choice report draws on national and state data, peer-reviewed research, and practitioner reports to analyze factors that shape postsecondary and career pathways for young men.

AT-A-GLANCE: KEY TAKEAWAYS



CAREER READINESS MATTERS

Readiness includes skills, mindset, and navigation.



EXPLORATION REQUIRES ACCESS

Programs like CTE can open doors to possibilities.



SOCIAL CAPITAL SHAPES DECISIONS

Relationships can inform and guide choices.



SUPPORT SYSTEMS INFLUENCE OUTCOMES

Culturally responsive support matters.

COLLEGE & 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.

Conley (2012) identifies four essential components of readiness that help students navigate their learning, make informed decisions, and take action toward their goals.

Together, these dimensions provide students with the tools necessary for both academic and career success.

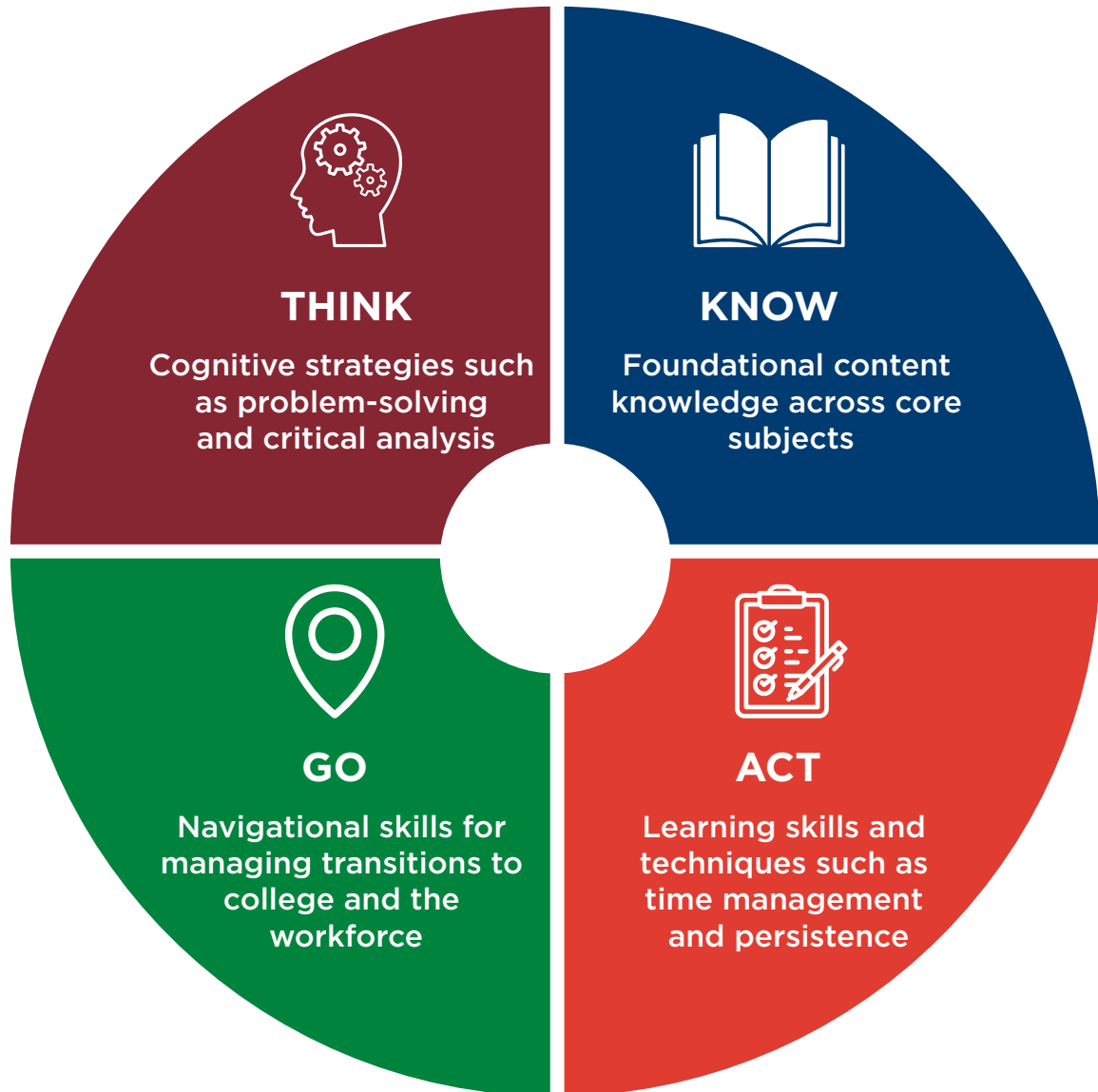
The concept emphasizes that being “ready” involves more than meeting academic benchmarks—it also requires self-regulation, adaptability, and goal-directed behavior.

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.

In the following section, we highlight Conley’s Framework and its relevance to understanding young men’s career pathway experiences.

THE CONLEY FRAMEWORK:

Four Key Components of College & Career Readiness



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Students who have access to readiness resources and experiences are better able to transfer their learning into real-world contexts and pursue meaningful pathways in college and careers.

This framework is especially important for young men who often navigate additional barriers in accessing the tools and opportunities that build readiness.

CAREER PATHWAYS

Career pathways provide students with structured learning experiences that connect education to real-world career. The Career Technical Education (CTE) program plays a vital role in helping students explore interests, develop employable skills, and plan for life after high school—whether that includes college, the workforce, or military service.

Early exposure to CTE programs can lead to higher engagement, motivation, and participation.

-Falco & Steen, 2018

CTE pathways allow students to discover their interests, develop employable skills, and understand the education or training required for different career paths.

CTE PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE



14

Main Clusters

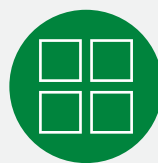
Organized career areas that connect education to workforce needs.



72

Sub-Clusters

Detailed career pathways within each cluster.



Bridges Education & Workforce

Aligns classroom learning with industry demand.



Multiple Options

Prepares students for college, careers, or military service.

WHO INFLUENCES CAREER DECISIONS?

Outside of programs like CTE, students decision-making processes are influenced by many key individuals in their lives. (Huerta et al., 2018).



**Parents/
Guardians**



Peers



Teachers



**School
Counselors**

SCHOOL COUNSELORS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE



Trained through the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), counselors play a vital role in assisting students with career and professional development by:

- 1. helping them understand their options,**
- 2. make informed decisions,**
- 3. and identify their interests, strengths, and areas for growth.**

The standards of the ASCA model guide counselors to help students to develop self-awareness, engage in social emotional learning, build self-confidence, and maintain a positive attitude toward education and career pathways.

Making counselors better equipped helps students navigate their educational experiences and prepare for future college and career opportunities.

SOCIAL CAPITAL:

Connections That Shape Career Decisions

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;).

It then can expand from the individual level to social groups, formal organizations, and even nations.



This growing network of support systems and knowledgeable people provides access to information that grants the student the ability to investigate and assess new and advantageous opportunities.

-Portes, 1998; Salisbury et al., 2011

THE ROLE OF PATRIARCHY

Challenging Norms & Expanding Possibilities

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.

Teachers themselves play a significant role in the reproduction of the patriarchal narrative and often perceive boys as “more difficult to teach than girls”.

-British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2023

IMPACTS ON YOUNG MEN



LIMITED SELF-EXPRESSION

Pressure to conform to rigid norms can discourage vulnerability and openness.



ENGAGEMENT & RELATIONSHIPS

Societal expectations can lead to young men disengage in learning environments and affect how they engage with others.



RESTRICTED CAREER OPTIONS

Careers in education, healthcare, or the arts may be viewed as “not for men”.



BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

Stigma around seeking help can prevent young men from accessing needed resources.

YOUNG MEN & POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

National data reinforce the gendered educational divide.

There are multiple explanations for a stronger representation in the workforce immediately after high school for men including; 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.

44%

of young college students are men (PRC, 2023)

42%

of students ages 18-24 at four-year schools are men (PRC, 2023)

1 MILLION

fewer young men in college than a decade ago.



Fewer young men are enrolling in college, and the gap continues to widen.

CTE: A PROMISING PATHWAY

Career and Technical Education (CTE) has been identified as a promising route to reconnect disengaged young men with education and employment.

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...male students who engage in CTE have better educational and employment outcomes than those who do not.

-MDRC

HOW CTE BENEFITS YOUNG MEN



HANDS-ON LEARNING

Engages students through practical, real-world experience.



CAREER PREPARATION

Builds skills that align with in-demand jobs and industry needs.



BETTER OUTCOMES

Associated with stronger educational and employment results.

CAREER PATHWAY EXPERIENCES

The benefits of mentorship programs largely suggest 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).



SAFE SPACES

Mentoring programs create spaces where young men feel seen, valued, and supported.



SELF-ESTEEM

Mentoring boosts confidence and helps build a positive sense of self.



ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Students report improved grades, engagement, and academic outcomes.



CONFIDENCE

Young men envision themselves in careers they may have not considered before.

Participants in Zell's Brother2Brother program (2011) reported strengthened self-esteem, higher academic achievement, and increased belief in their ability to overcome stereotypes and success professionally.

YOUNG MEN FACE BARRIERS BEING SUPPORTED



REPRESENTATION AND MENTORSHIP MATTER

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.



CAREER GUIDANCE IS NOT EQUALLY ACCESSIBLE

Studies show 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 INCLUDE:



Socioeconomic
Status



First-Generation
Status



Cultural Stereotypes
& Social Comparisons



THE IMPACT

These barriers and lack of support defer many young men from showing interest and pursuing a postsecondary education.

RESEARCH GAPS

Despite these insights, researchers consistently note gaps in understanding young men's post-secondary pathways.



DATA GAPS

There is a lack on local and disaggregated data specifically focused on young men in the Research Triangle.



INTERSECTIONAL GAPS

More research is needed that examines race, gender, class, and their combined impact on outcomes.



LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH NEEDED

We need more long-term studies that follow young men across key life transitions.



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.

-BERA (2023)

RESEARCH INITIATIVE

UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION AS A CAREER CHOICE

FOR NC RESEARCH TRIANGLE MEN

This section introduces the research initiative that frames this report. It provides the overview, background, and methodology of the study.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Understanding Career Choices of North Carolina Research Triangle Men can lead to interventions beneficial to understanding the experiences of a diverse assemblage of boys and men in North Carolina.

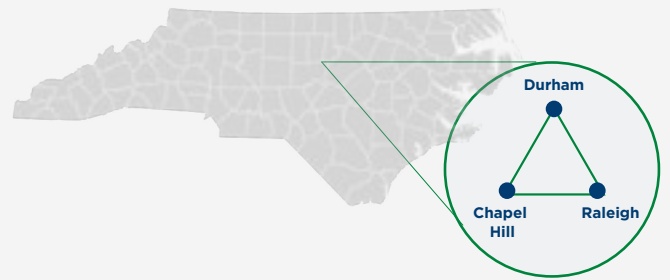
Having an in-depth understanding of the barriers that Research Triangle youth face and the support they need for their careers will affect their abilities to live full lives as adults and be productive citizens.

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.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this research is to address the factors influencing the choices young men in the North Carolina Research Triangle make when pursuing education and careers.

THE RESEARCH TRIANGLE REGION



Population: Approximately 2.4 million people



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.

TOP 10

Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill rank in the top ten most educated cities in the nation.

—McCann, 2025

STATISTICS: EDUCATION AND YOUTH

38%

of North Carolina youth, aged 18 – 24, enroll in postsecondary or higher education.

—Postsecondary, 2023

10.3%

of 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



A SHORTAGE OF CERTIFIED TEACHERS

There is currently a shortage of certified teachers for NC's P-12 educational system and therefore a crisis in classrooms

—Waid, 2025

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SHORTAGE



Low pay



Reduced enrollment in educator preparation programs



High attrition rates



Increased demand



Funding challenges

—Waid, 2025

METHODOLOGY

Because little is known about education career choice among males in the Triangle, interviews were used as a method for collecting context-specific information.

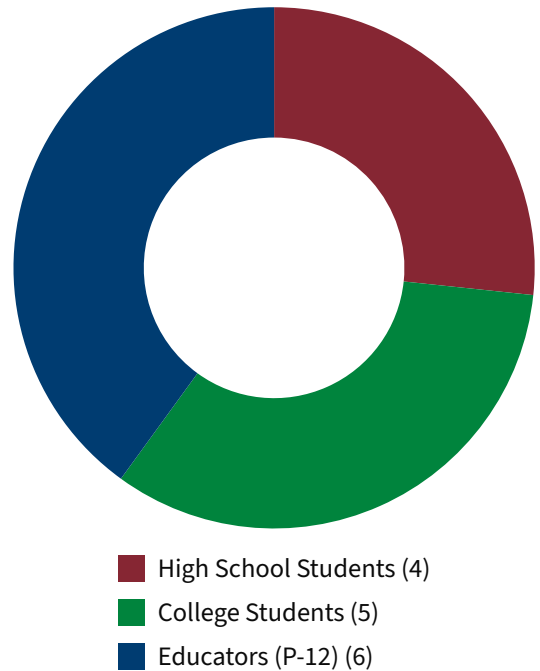
QUALITATIVE APPROACH

In-depth interviews were conducted to capture personal perspectives and lived experiences.

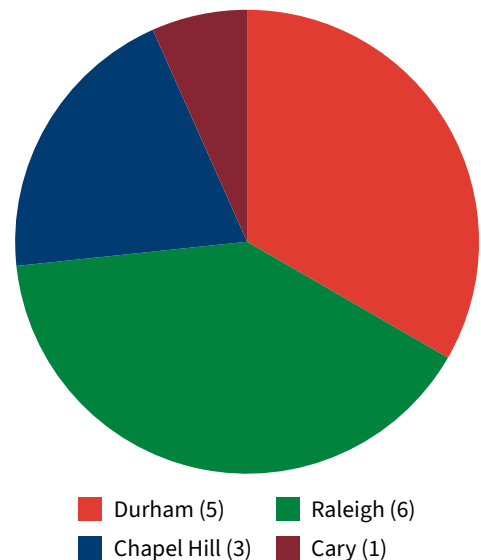
QUASI-LONGITUDINAL DESIGN

Four high school students for a current perspective, five college students for a recent reflection, and six working educators for a longer-term reflection.

PARTICIPANT BREAKDOWN

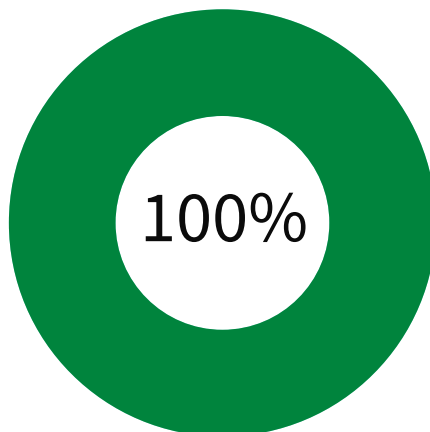


LOCATION



GENDER

All participants identify as men.



OUR GOAL

To fill a gap of literature on young men in the Research Triangle and inform strategies to support their career choices and pursuit of educational pathways.

FORTHCOMING BOOK AND SEPTEMBER 2026 CONVENING



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
- Discuss how faculty, administrators, and other institutional agents could use the information presented in the book
- 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



SEPTEMBER 2026 CONVENING

September 28-29, 2026 / NCCU Student Center
Registration and program information forthcoming.

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