



UP**SKILL**  
HOUSTON

# **Focus Group Analysis**

August 2017



**Outreach** Strategists  
LLC

# Executive Summary

## Focus Group Analysis and Key Findings

### Purpose

At a time that many youth and young adults are underemployed or encountering difficulties finding employment, the gap between the number of individuals interested in/trained for middle-skill jobs and the number of those jobs available is puzzling. Outreach Strategists partnered with Greater Houston Partnership's UpSkill Houston initiative to conduct focus groups of students and parents to gain a better understanding of why this gap may exist. With their small size and emphasis on interpersonal interactions, focus groups provide the ideal avenue to gain a better understanding of perceptions about middle-skill jobs and the decision-making process that goes into choices of education and employment. By allowing intergroup conversations and direct follow-up, focus groups enable us to gain a much deeper and granular understanding of a group's views, motivations, and reasoning, with the goal of informing UpSkill Houston's awareness campaign.

### Methodology

In conjunction with UpSkill Houston partner BakerRipley, Outreach Strategists recruited a diverse array of focus group participants, including current high school students and parents with children in high school and middle school. In total, 46 people participated in the focus groups. Focus group participants were divided into five groups:

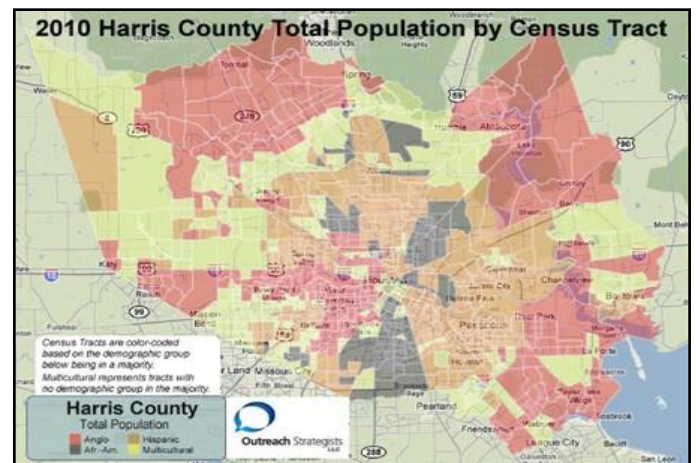
- High school female students
- High school male students
- Parents of high school students
- Parents of middle school students
- Spanish-speaking parents of high school or middle school students.

Prior to the focus group discussion, participants completed a written survey which helped collect information on background, income, and other demographic factors. Each focus group consisted of 8–12

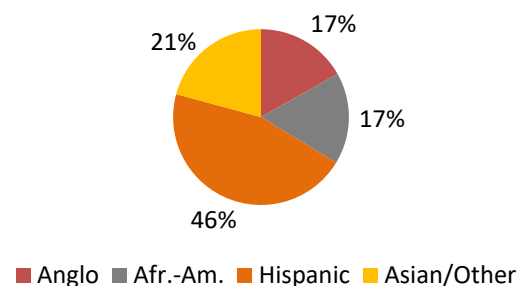
participants and lasted approximately 1.5 – 2 hours. Discussions were assisted and moderated by Outreach Strategists facilitators, based on a number of points of inquiry designed in concert with UpSkill Houston.

### Student Participants

Student participants were recruited from a diverse pool to reflect the diversity of Houston's ethnic landscape and broad demographic trends.



Ethnic Breakdown of Student Focus Group Participants



When asked to describe their family's financial status, students overwhelmingly identified as 'middle class,' as opposed to 'working class' or 'upper class.'

## Challenges and Opportunities

Facilitators guided participants through the following four areas, designed not only to identify existing barriers but to also provide insights into overcoming these barriers:

- Defining a desirable profession
- Post-high school plans and goals
- Perceptions of middle-skill employment and positions
- Information sources used when planning for the future

### Defining a Desirable Profession

Consensus:

- A good position should be focused work that is enjoyable or fulfilling.
- Employment should be stable, and long-term.
- All groups agree that employment should allow a person to achieve financial stability and to support a nuclear family.
- Good employment includes opportunities for growth and promotion within the company.
- There was a strong desire for a long-term 'career,' not just an easily replaceable 'job.'

Parents:

- Parents placed particular value in the 'brand' of an employer, which served as short-hand for desirable qualities such as stability, job security, and growth potential.
- Good employment should involve skills that can be transferred to another role, providing insulation against disruptive life events.

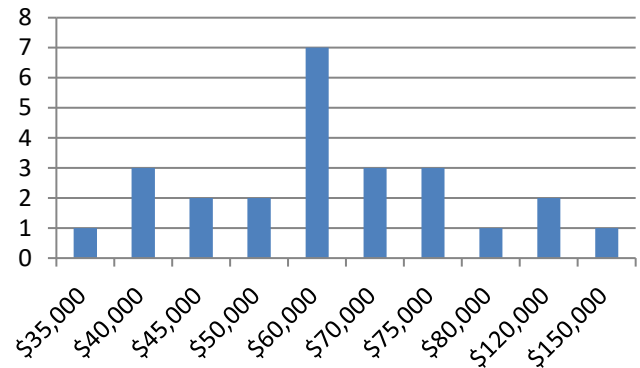
Students:

- Students put particular emphasis on the ability of profession to contribute to community and society.
- Students also said that a good job is one that could not be replaced by a machine, expressing a profound worry about automation.

Salary:

When parents were asked about starting salary, responses fell between a range of \$35,000 to \$150,000, which \$60,000 as the most common response.

Parent Free Responses for a 'Good' Starting Salary

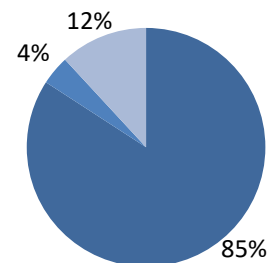


### Post-High School Plans and Goals

Parents and students were asked to discuss elements of the students' plans beyond high school.

- Students and parents overwhelmingly plan for a four-year college after high school

Student Participant Responses on Post-High School Plans



■ 4-year College ■ Community College ■ Technical School

- All groups agreed that they viewed four-year college as the best way to:
  - Ensure long-term success
  - Maintain good and stable employment
  - Achieve financial independence and stability
  - Support one's own family

#### Students:

- Students specifically noted that they saw four-year college not only as essential for good employment, but also for a position that does 'good work' by contributing to society. They provided examples such as aiding others or advancing societal knowledge.
- Students were also motivated to prove their parents proud and to achieve more than what their parents had been able to.
- Students referenced both parental and societal expectations that they would attend four-year college after high school, which were impressed from an early age.

#### Parents:

- Parents saw four-year college as also being 'flexible,' allowing a child to recalibrate their path in life should they encounter difficulties, something parents believe two-year college and job-specific trades would not allow for.
- Parents' overriding motivation was to ensure that their children complete post-secondary education, and, in the cases of parents who had not attended four-year college, to achieve what they had not.
- The aspirational goal of children attending four-year college was especially intense among Spanish-speaking parents, many of whom stated that they were willing to make significant sacrifices so that their children could attend.

### Perceptions of Middle-Skill Employment and Positions

Groups were asked to provide their perceptions of middle-skill employment through discussion in order to better gauge perceptions of the phrase 'middle-skill' as well as to determine if professions described using the term were seen as either jobs or careers.

#### Consensus:

- In general, all groups classified middle-skill roles as 'jobs' as opposed to 'careers.'
- In comparison to 'careers,' 'jobs' were seen as labor-intensive, repetitive, having poor long-term prospects, and requiring little knowledge.

#### Students:

- Students viewed middle-skill positions negatively, female students particularly so.
- When asked what they thought of middle-skill positions, female students said that these would be jobs that would need some training, but no significant education or license. They did, however, think that these jobs would be stable.
- Male students described middle-skill positions as being ordinary or 'everyday,' and not especially important or desirable

#### Parents:

- Parents viewed middle-skill positions more positively, but worried about physical safety, growth potential, and long-term prospects. There was a distinct fear that middle-skill positions could result in a child becoming 'stuck' with few options for the future.
- Parents also described middle-skill positions as technical or blue-collar jobs. Again, parents reiterated that if their child pursued such a job that the child would be limited in skills, education, and experience, and could wind up struggling in life with few options.

### Information Sources Used When Planning for Future

Participants were asked who they turn to for assistance when planning for the students' future. Several sources were mentioned including individuals, organizations, online sources, and external marketing.

#### Consensus:

- The key human information gatekeepers across all groups were those with some kind of personal connection. Such connections could come in the form of family members, family friends, teachers, neighbors, and professionals with a close relationship to the family, such as a family doctor or co-worker. Overall, personal connections are highly trusted.
- All groups mentioned consulting with college representatives or recruiters, and attending events such as college fairs and tours organized through schools.

- Schools counselors were also mentioned in almost all the focus groups, with parents and female students citing more descriptive and meaningful interactions with school and guidance counselors.
- Educational institutions and community organizations are important mediums and trusted sources across both parents and students for communicating messages.

#### Parents:

- Parents are especially receptive to religious institutions through fellow congregants and informative programming.
- Parents felt the need to do additional research upon seeing TV commercials, billboards, and other collateral. Parents mistrust unsolicited information, specifically social media.
- Students and parents seemed to differ on how they preferred to receive employment information. Parents referenced job fairs more frequently while students more readily referenced digital platforms, reflecting the generational 'digital divide.'

## Insights

Although participants identified numerous hurdles to promoting middle-skill employment, they also provided insights that will enable UpSkill Houston to better position middle-skill opportunities in ways that resonate with students and parents. Underlying these insights are: (1) students' motivation to meet parental and societal expectations that they attend a four-year college and desire to make their parents proud, and (2) parents' motivation for their children to achieve something better than they have. Our insights for reshaping, directing and depicting the messages ensure that students and parents feel that middle-skill opportunities satisfy those motivations.

### Reshaping the Message

It would be prudent when marketing to students to focus on the nature of what a job entails and to include features that demonstrate the uniqueness of the work, stability, positive societal impact, and imagery of a modern

environment and work style. For parents, it would be more effective to focus on recognizable names of companies that are hiring and what benefits employment in these fields would provide. In both cases incorporating accounts of individuals in the field who are happy and fulfilled will lead to greater success in generating interest.

The idea of starting a business and working for oneself was an emerging trend in every group. Students and parents placed entrepreneurship in high regard. Branding middle-skill positions as providing the skills to establish entrepreneurial careers will also convey job stability and longevity. The skills learned in a middle-skill position are the same whether a person calls it a 'job' or 'career.' Emphasizing that these skills can be applied to a person's own life once they receive on-the-job experience from a reputable business will be a point of interest to parents and students.

Responses showed that it would be useful to create awareness about the middle-skill positions that are available by correlating these to a field of study or particular industry. Registered Nurses are recognizable because of their impactful role in every day society and their place in the healthcare field. Positions should be presented as relatable, valuable, impressive, and performed by both males and females alike.

### Delivering the Message

*Who should deliver the message?*

Institutions- Students and parents react positively to direct appeals and personal contact. Collaborations with schools and staff, local organizations and institutions, and religious institutions will create validity for the campaign and will make parents and students more open to the message.

Success Stories- Seeing or hearing success stories from people of similar backgrounds stood out as an example of what would help to change students' decisions to attend four-year college.

Individuals- In addition to partnering with trusted messengers, providing individualized attention from knowledgeable sources would help advance interest in middle-skill careers. For instance, engaging school counselors who can help parents and students identify a

job or field that aligns with their interests, suggest career options and benefits, and create pathways for achieving that position would be effective.

*What should be included in the message?*

- Use recognizable brand names or descriptions for parents, and industries for students.
- Emphasize high value characteristics of careers in Houston's petrochemical, healthcare, energy, advanced manufacturing, and life science industries.
- Promote the characteristics of: stability, growth potential, education and training that leads to licenses and credentials, transferable skills, benefits, and competitive salary.
- Refer to 'careers' rather than 'jobs.'
- Use trusted messengers and institutions to create credibility.

### Depicting the Message

Imagery provides an opportunity to convert many of the positive aspects of middle-skill positions, while combating many of the negative perceptions that students and parents have about these types of positions. Visuals provide an ideal means to demonstrate safety, satisfaction, modern work environments and work styles, innovation, and using advanced technology.

Prepared by  
**Outreach Strategists**  
LLC

On behalf of



# Full Report:

## Focus Group Key Findings and Analysis: Post-High School Plans and Middle Skill Perceptions

### Methodology & Overview

Outreach Strategists conducted a series of focus groups to gain a better understanding of prevailing post-high school plans and expectations of students and parents, and existing perceptions of the job market and employment opportunities, particularly in relation to ‘middle skill’ jobs, or jobs that require more education or training than high school but less than a four-year degree.

With a resurgence in energy, manufacturing, petrochemicals, construction, and life sciences, there is great demand among employers for employees who fall within this range of middle skills positions. However, there is a serious gap between the demand for employees with these skill sets, and the number of people entering and graduating from programs that teach these skills. This gap places serious long-term constraints on the ability of the Houston economy to grow and prosper. At a time when many youth are underemployed or encountering difficulties finding employment, this gap would seem especially puzzling. Focus groups of students and parents were conducted to gain a better understanding of why this gap exists.

By virtue of their small size and emphasis on interactions, focus groups provided the ideal

avenue to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of middle skill jobs, and the decision-making process that goes into choosing an education and career. The focus groups’ conversations and follow-up questioning provide a much deeper and granular understanding of a group’s views and motivations.

In conjunction with UpSkill Houston partner BakerRipley, Outreach Strategists recruited a diverse array of focus group participants, including current high school students and parents with students in high school and middle school. Focus group participants were divided into five distinct groups: high school female students, high school male students, parents of high school students, parents of middle school students, and Spanish-dominant parents of high school or middle school students.

Each focus group consisted of 8 – 12 participants, and lasted approximately 1.5 – 2 hours. Discussions were assisted and moderated by Outreach Strategists facilitators based on a number of points of inquiry designed in concert with UpSkill Houston. In total, 46 people participated in the focus groups.

## Future Plans

### Summary of plans

When asked about their future plans for themselves or their child, we found that both parents and students overwhelmingly planned to attend a four-year college program after students completed high school. Only three students (all males) expressed any different primary plans: one planned for a 2-year trade school to become an electrician, one planned to enlist in the military with the goal of later attending a four-year college, and one planned to become a piercing and tattoo artist. Other parents and students mentioned military service as a potential option, but as a backup to a four-year college. Several parents stated they would consider alternatives to four-year college, but only if their child did not receive enough financial aid.

### Reasoning behind plans

When asked why they were planning for four-year college, all groups agreed that they viewed it as the best way to ensure long-term success, to get a good and stable job, and to eventually support one's own nuclear family (e.g. spouse and children). All English-speaking groups agreed that four-year college would be the best means for a student to follow their passion and to obtain a fulfilling job, and placed additional value on the less tangible idea that college would promote a student's personal growth through leadership, socialization, and exposure to greater diversity. Spanish-dominant parents placed a greater emphasis on college as an opportunity that should not be missed, and were especially focused on wanting their children to achieve what they could not. Although

several English-speaking parents touched on this idea of children achieving what they could not, it was the overwhelming consensus in the Spanish-speaking group.

Students specifically noted that they saw four-year college not only as essential for a 'good job,' but also for a job that does 'good work' by contributing to society, with examples such as directly aiding others or advancing knowledge. Some students also noted that four-year college was an expectation their parents had for them from an early age, and framed it as inevitable. For their part, parents, both English and Spanish dominant, saw a four-year college education as also being 'flexible,' allowing a child to recalibrate their path in life should they encounter difficulties, something parents believe other options and job specific trades would not allow for.

### Do parent and child plans differ?

The majority of parents stated that their plans for their children, and their understanding of their children's plans for themselves, were for the student to pursue a four-year college degree. Most differences regarding these college plans focused on which school to attend, living arrangements, or the need to work part-time while in college. Several English-speaking parents noted that finances were a significant factor, and that if their child did not obtain sufficient financial aid they would push for other considerations. These thoughts were not mirrored in the Spanish-speaking group however, where many said that they were willing to make significant



sacrifices to ensure their children attended college. Three Spanish-dominant and two middle school parents admitted challenges in pushing their children to focus on academics due to a perceived lack of interest on the part of the student. The middle school parents in particular noted that the children in question were highly focused on athletics, and the parents expressed concern about long-term livelihood given competition for employment in professional sports and the potential for career-ending injuries.

### How should a child contribute to the family?

When asked about when and how a child should contribute to the family, the overwhelming consensus from all parents

was that completing post-high school education was the most important thing for their children to do. In fact, parents across all groups expressed a worry that early income from a full-time job might dissuade their children from pursuing high education, to the child's long-term detriment. Generally, parents prioritized the long-term earning potential or success of their children over immediate contributions. In fact, the Spanish-speaking parents inverted the question stating that the family writ large may be expected to sacrifice to contribute to their child's education. Meanwhile, English-speaking parents further defined 'contribution' as their child obtaining financial aid, getting a job after graduation, and becoming financially independent.

## Information Sources

### Gatekeepers

The key trusted sources of information (gatekeepers) identified across all groups, students and parents, were those with some kind of personal connection.

These included fellow family members (both immediate and extended), family friends, teachers, and professionals with a close relationship to the family (such as a family doctor or co-workers). One high school parent went further, saying that she used her personal network to put her daughter in touch with professionals working in fields that her daughter was interested in pursuing, and that this was a great help in focusing the daughter's interests and expectations. Churches, through informative programming and fellow parishioners, were also a recurrent

theme, and were held in especially high esteem by parents. All parent groups as well as female students mentioned going to school guidance counsellors for advice, although male students did not mention consulting counsellors. Several male students noted they had conversations on their own with individuals in the field they were interested in pursuing, one with his doctor and another with an electrician neighbor.

### Other information resources

All groups mentioned consulting with college representatives or recruiters, through college fairs at school, and college tours organized through schools. All groups said that they used the internet to conduct research, with parents expressing some skepticism about the information found

online. Students specifically mentioned using the social media platform Instagram to learn more about their areas of interest, and also utilizing online tools such as Naviance (through HISD) or Brain Cap that allowed them to search and filter financial aid opportunities. Parents meanwhile expressed far more interest in school and community organized events surrounding higher education, such as fairs and school drives, reflecting the generational ‘digital divide.’ Parents also specifically mentioned TV commercials, billboards, and other collateral, although often in the context of this prompting them to conduct further research.

### Information skepticism

In addition to parents’ general skepticism towards internet sources, English-speaking parents specifically singled out Facebook as an unreliable resource, although many followed up to say they may look into information found on Facebook further. Parents were also highly mistrustful of any

## Job and Career Analysis

### Traits of a good job or career

Broad consensus existed across all groups about traits of a good job and career. All groups agreed that a good job should be work that is enjoyable, something you have a passion for, or otherwise find fulfilling. This job should be stable and offer long-term employment. Everyone said a good job should pay well. Absent a precise figure, groups defined good pay by what it enabled them to do: achieve financial stability and security, and allow them to support their family. Relatedly, the job should enable financial independence from one’s parents and extended family. A good job should also

information that comes unsolicited or unprompted, thus it would behoove any information campaign to be integrated with trusted sources such as schools, community organizations, and churches.

### When planning begins

Although the exact timeframe for when they began planning for the future varied between and among groups, a majority agreed on a range between the beginning of middle school to no later than the beginning of college. All groups had participants who stated that they began planning as early as elementary school, with a slightly higher proportion of those who started planning so early coming from the Spanish-dominant group. Several middle school parents noted that they thought it was too early to make specific plans for their child, but that they had begun to emphasize that the child would need to pursue some kind of post-high school education.

have opportunities for growth in position through raises, promotions, or other increases in responsibilities and authority. Notably, all of the above-mentioned traits are shared among middle skills careers.

All English-speaking groups, but not Spanish-speaking parents, also defined a good job as owning one’s own business or some form of entrepreneurship.

Parents additionally noted that benefits, such as retirement plans, health insurance, sick leave, and vacation time, are important

to a good job. English-speaking parents also said that working for a well-known company with a good reputation would be important to them, with such a company serving as a sort of ‘shorthand’ for determining if a job has many of the previously mentioned traits or not. English-speaking parents also expressed fears of potential lay-offs or disruptive life events, and said that a good job should involve skills that can be transferred to another job type should something happen.

Students said that a good job would also involve contributing to their community or to humanity in general, whether by directly helping people, advancing knowledge, or protecting one’s country. A female student added that a good job offered substantial financial security, but that she did not view as helping people directly, would still allow her to financially contribute to causes and organizations that were important to her.

Students also said that a good job would be one that could not be replaced by a machine, expressing a profound worry about automation.

#### Parental views on starting salary

When asked what a good starting salary would be for their children, parents responded with a range of answers from \$35,000 to \$150,000, with an average response of \$66,800. A majority of responses fell between a range of \$40,000 to \$75,000, with \$60,000 both the most common and median response. If three outlying responses are omitted –all of which were well over \$100,000 and half again as large as the next largest response– the average declines to \$58,181.82 while the median response remains \$60,000.



### Job categorization exercise

All focus groups were presented with a list of jobs (see charts below), some selected from the UpSkill Houston campaign and others chosen from a group of jobs requiring a -year college degree and generally thought of as prestigious.

Participants were then asked if they considered these to be 'jobs' or 'careers.' middle skill occupations from the UpSkill Houston campaign were chosen to

represent all industry sectors, with a preference for those that were featured in multiple sectors.

For ease of reference, middle skills in the below charts are highlighted in blue. We have also provided a 'middle skills score' for each group, which is a sum of the total number of 'career' responses for each middle skills job (for comparison's sake, the score is normalized for middle school and Spanish-speaking parents groups).

### Students

Position	Female Students			Male Students	
	Job?	Career?		Job?	Career?
Electrician	11	1		4	8
Welder	6	6		6	6
Attorney	0	12		0	12
Registered Nurse	5	7		3	9
Accountant	1	11		7	5
Industrial Machinery Mechanic	3	9		8	4
Doctor	0	12		0	12
Quality Control Inspector	8	4		5	7
Crane and Tower operator	12	0		11	1
Power Plant Operator	6	6		5	7
Engineer	0	12		0	12
<b>Middle Skills score</b>	<b>33</b>			<b>42</b>	

### Parents

Position	High school Parents		Middle school parents		Spanish-speaking Parents	
	Job?	Career?	Job?	Career?	Job?	Career
Electrician	1	11	5	3	5	4
Welder	3	9	5	3	5	4
Attorney	0	12	0	8	0	9
Registered Nurse	0	12	0	8	0	9
Accountant	0	12	0	8	0	9
Industrial Machinery Mechanic	2	10	5	3	1	8
Doctor	0	12	0	8	0	9
Quality Control Inspector	6	6	4	4	1	8
Crane and Tower operator	8	4	7	1	4	5
Power Plant Operator	5	7	5	3	2	7
Engineer	0	12	0	8	0	9
<b>Middle Skills score</b>	<b>59</b>		<b>37.5</b>		<b>60</b>	

### Exercise summary

In general, all groups were more likely to classify middle skills professions as 'jobs' as opposed to 'careers,' which has a negative connotation as we explored further on. Students in general were more likely to classify middle skills professions as 'jobs' compared with parents, and female

students were more likely to classify middle skills professions as 'jobs' compared with male students.

More male than female students ranked each middle skills profession as a 'career,' with the sole and somewhat puzzling

exception of Industrial Machinery Mechanic.

Also notably, Registered Nurse was a consistent outlier across all groups and was ranked as a 'career' far more often than any of the other middle skill professions. One possible explanation is that, compared to the other middle skill professions presented, Nurse has a clear connotation with a well-known and respected industry. This suggests that the context of what industry a specific job is in could be vitally important to how it is perceived.

In every group there was some level of disagreement and uncertainty among participants as to whether examples should be jobs or careers. Multiple students and parents said that they could see a profession being both a job and a career, and that whether it was one or the other would depend on the circumstances, benefits, and what a person would do with the opportunity.

This level of uncertainty was particularly prominent among the middle school parents, and may partly explain their relatively lower 'middle skills score' compared to the other parent groups.

## Middle Skill Perceptions

### Gauging Perceptions without categories

After this classification exercise, participants were presented with a list consisting solely of the middle skills jobs previously listed: electrician, welder, registered nurse, industrial machinery

### Distinguishing jobs versus careers

When asked what defined the difference between a job and career in their minds, participants across all groups came to a near unanimous consensus. Careers were almost universally viewed as superior to jobs. Participants thought that careers are longer term than jobs, which are seen as either temporary or a position from which someone can easily be fired or laid off. Careers require greater skill than jobs, meaning that they require more education and training, but also come with an attendant higher income. Although for students this additional education was thought of primarily in terms of a college degree, parents from all groups suggested it might take the form of some kind of credentialing, certification, or licensing program. Careers were also seen as offering a path forward through promotions, raises, and increased responsibilities, as well as increased authority. The element of growth was especially important for many, and participants who waffled on classifying profession as a 'job' or 'career' all cited that they could see ways for a person to advance and grow to transform their work into a career.

mechanic, quality control inspector, crane and tower operator, and power plant operator. Participants were then asked how they felt about these jobs and how they would classify them. Responses varied across groups, with female students

reacting very negatively, male students reacting negatively and with disinterest, and parents reacting neutrally to slightly positively, albeit with some reservations.

Among the female students, the only job many said they would be interested in was registered nurse (despite their greater trend to classify industrial machinery mechanic as a 'career' rather than 'job'). The only other job one student expressed interest in was welder, and then specifically as an artistic pursuit. They also agreed that such jobs would only require an associate's degree or some kind of certification, rather than a four-year bachelor's degree or higher. In general, the students agreed that these were industrial or maintenance jobs, they would be labor-intensive, would require little brainwork, have no opportunity for job growth, and that they would not enjoy these jobs. Female students expressed intensely negative perceptions of the jobs, and in particular that, because these were not jobs that required much 'brainwork,' pursuing one would leave them at a future disadvantage.

Male students described the listed jobs as being either 'starter jobs' or 'blue collar jobs.' They believed that these jobs would be labor intensive and require a great deal of repetitive action, which would quickly become boring and fatiguing. Male students agreed that the jobs were ones that receive little respect in society because they have low value and little ability to positively affect people and the world. Males tended to agree that they would do such jobs if they had to, but that they would much rather find some other kind of work.

While all the student groups' reactions were negative, the parents groups were largely neutral to positive.

Parents classified these jobs as skills, trades, blue collar jobs, or technical jobs. They agreed that these jobs would require some additional education or training after high school due to skill requirements, but not a full four-year degree. There was a general consensus that these jobs would fall within an income bracket ranging from \$40-60k per year, and that their children would be financially independent if they pursued such jobs. One parent in particular noted that she knew these kinds of jobs were in high demand and always needed, and that it would be very easy to find employment. However, one middle school parent had an intensely negative reaction, stating that they did not think that these jobs were viable careers or professions, that there would be no room for growth with fixed salaries, and that such a job would underserve their child's potential. There was also concern about the relative safety of these jobs, with labor-intensive work, especially with heavy machinery, many parents said that physical danger was a serious concern.

### Gauging perceptions of pay and benefits

High school students were asked if a series of statements were true or false about jobs that they could expect to get with two years of education after high school.

These statements were derived from UpSkill Houston, and are all true.

	Female Students			Male Students	
	True	False		True	False
Receive a starting salary between \$40-60k	5	7		9	3
Opportunity for substantial raises and promotions	5	7		11	1
Receive benefits like health insurance, retirement plans	7	5		4	8
Have paid time off, vacation time, and sick leave	9	3		2	10
Employer will pay for additional education and training	8	4		6	6

Male and Female students demonstrated almost exactly opposite perceptions of what they could receive from a job with two years of post-secondary education. While male students saw plenty of direct financial opportunity from such jobs, female students believed that numerous benefits would be available (including puzzlingly that employers would help with additional education or training, but have little opportunity for raises or promotions). Gender norms may play a role in how the students view such jobs, with male students expecting hard manual labor while female students expect low level secretarial or office work.

In general, however, it is clear that high school students have no coherent idea of what middle skills jobs are, what duties and work they entail, and what kinds of compensation and benefits are available for this work.

### Category perceptions

All groups were presented with several phrases that have been used to describe the target jobs UpSkill Houston is focused on in order to measure reactions and existing perceptions of parents and students.

When asked what they thought of **Middle Skill Jobs**, female students said that these would be jobs that would need some training, but no significant education or license. They did, however, think that these jobs would be stable. Male students described middle skills jobs as being ordinary or ‘everyday,’ and not especially important. They agreed with female students that such jobs would require some skill or training, but no significant education. One male student said that a semi-truck driver was what immediately came to mind with the phrase. The parent groups said that these would be technical or blue collar jobs. All parent groups worried that if their child pursued such a job that they would be limited in skills, education, and experience, and their child could wind up struggling in life with few options. Spanish-language parents in



particular said that they believed these would be temporary or project-based jobs, and that if their child were to have one then they would lose opportunities to people with more education or experience. Overall, the term **Middle Skill Jobs** had varying negative connotations across all focus groups.

When asked about **High Skill Jobs**, there was substantial consensus across all groups. Every group agreed that such jobs would require four or more years of education after high school and possibly substantial training. In return, these jobs would have very high pay. Parents in particular noted that a high skill job is highly technical in nature, but also comes with significant job security. **High Skill Jobs** were seen as requiring substantial investment, but highly desirable.

Groups had different reactions when asked about **Technical Jobs**. Female students said that such jobs would only require a high school education and would not need any specialized license or degree. Male students disagreed on requirements, believing that technical jobs would require some education after high school but less than four-year college. They believed that these jobs deal specifically with technology, electronics, machinery, or computers and computer coding. Parents agreed more with the male students than female students, believing that technical jobs would require some kind of certification or training, but not four-year college. Parents believed that technical jobs would be highly specific to some field, and would work directly with computers, IT, or communications. With inconsistent perceptions between the focus groups, it is hard to judge the efficacy of the use of the term **Technical Jobs**.

## Alternatives to University

### Community college

When asked about community college, high school students and parents agreed that it would be a good backup or 'safety' option, and that it is a good way to complete college core requirements before transferring to a four-year university. Parent groups further noted that community college was attractive as a less expensive option for their children. Several English-speaking parents said that community college is also useful as a means to test if a four-year college is right for their child, and that in the event college is not a good fit the child will still have an associate's degree.

### What could spark change of plans?

With the overwhelming response from all groups that future educational plans would be four-year college, the focus groups concluded with asking participants what might make them reconsider their plans for themselves or their children and follow a different path. All groups generally agreed that knowing about high-paying jobs that required less than a four-year degree might make them reconsider their future plans.

Among the female students, several mentioned that not receiving enough financial aid would also change their plans. Another female student stated that hearing the personal success stories of others who

have followed these alternative paths after high school would make her consider such a career path, and a third student said that knowing that there was a guaranteed job offer for her after leaving an associate's program would make her interested.

Among the male students, a consensus developed that they would consider alternate plans if potential jobs they could receive with an associate's degree were stable and relatively easier to get compared to a job with a four-year degree. Several male students also touched on potential benefits from these jobs, such as retirement

plans or health insurance, as something that could sway their decision.

Parents were more financially conscious than students, and several stated that if their child did not receive financial aid that would force them to reconsider plans for a four-year college, particularly if aid were available through other programs. Parents would also want to know about potential for job growth through careers requiring only an associate degree compared with those requiring a four-year degree.

## Take-Aways

### Money + Finances

- Cost of Education
- Earning Potential
- Change in attitude
- Child Contribution vs. Personal Income

Money and finances were a constant theme throughout all the focus groups. Financial challenges to post-secondary education are a concern for both parents and students. Those few that had already considered alternative routes to a four-year college had done so primarily as a fall back in the case that they would not be able to afford a four-year college.

Finances were also mentioned in terms of earning potential for certain jobs and careers. Parents and students both expect that a degree from a four-year university would create a more stable and financially independent future.

When parents were asked to write down the starting salary they believe their child could earn if they followed the plan that they had set forth (four-year college in most cases), a majority thought a salary between \$40-70,000 could be expected. Of note is that this is a comparable amount to what middle skill jobs offer without a four-year college degree.

Parents were asked if their attitude towards a middle skills degree would change if their child were guaranteed a job at a competitive salary without completing a four-year college degree. The parents would be accepting of this only if this was something that the child desired.

*Insight: Parents and students make decisions for the future together. In some cases, parents would identify potential career paths based on what the child enjoys doing and where their skill sets lay. They would then display these to the child as a potential opportunity. The parents in many cases appear to be the ‘driver’ and push the children to pursue certain things. There is a cycle where the parent introduces the concept to their child, but will only be the ‘driver’ if the child is amenable to the idea.*

Parents across the financial spectrum, regardless of background, had consensus that the most important task for their child is to complete their post-high school education, which was by far expected to be a four-year college degree. The presumed

notion was that low-income families would encourage their children to provide monetary support to assist their families- this was not true. Parents in all groups generally did not want to place any financial contribution requirements or expectations on their children. In fact, Spanish speaking parents were willing to make sacrifices to ensure that their children had the opportunity to fulfill any aspirational goals, which most frequently seemed to include a four-year college. The common expectations that parents verbalized was their belief that the child’s contributions to their families would be in the form of assisting younger siblings in navigating the process of post high school education and become financially independent for themselves.

## Timing

- Fluid
- Ill-defined
- Influenced by outside sources

Time periods of significance to determine students’ futures spanned a broad range. There was no agreement of either a season, grade, or time of year in which students could pinpoint when they began to think about their futures. Students mentioned that obtaining a four-year college degree was the path that was expected of them and parents reinforced this by disclosing that they constantly mentioned college to their children from a young age. In some cases, there were external factors such as standardized testing periods or college fairs

that induced a thought or consideration for the future.

*Insight: Focus on parents of students that are graduating from middle school to high school as they have a strong influence over their children. A majority of these are students who have not yet become fully independent and do not know what they will study after high school. Also focus on students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade who can benefit from guidance and support about future opportunities.*

## Sources

- Trusted vs. Skeptical
- Success Stories
- Direct Appeals & Wrap Around Services

Identifying the sources of information that parents and students rely on was an integral part of the discussion. Parents and students both value advice and information from **people, organizations, and institutions** with whom they have personal relationships or experiences. Influences from family and society have a significant impact on what a child decides to do in the future. Gathering new information and research is conducted through the internet. Parents were skeptical of information from unknown sources including social media and unprompted contact. Seeing or hearing success stories from people of similar backgrounds stood out as an example of what would help to change students' decision to attend a four-year college.

*Insight: Students and parents react positively to direct appeals and personal contact. Collaborations with local organizations, institutions, schools & staff, and religious institutions will create validity for the campaign and will make parents and students more accepting of the message if it*

*comes from a trusted messenger. Students want to see someone that has been in their shoes, pursued a non-traditional post high school path, and become successful. This should be someone that they recognize, or whose life experience and story is desirable **and** is accessible through the campaign.*

Parents, especially those that were speaking about their first child, expressed that they need assistance in learning more about how to navigate the process for their child's future. Students seemed to have workshops and programs at school that help them get "college ready" or provide "job shadowing" experience.

*Insight: In addition to partnering with trusted messengers, providing individualized attention such as wrap-around services that help parents and students identify a job or field that aligns with their interests, puts forth career options and their benefits, and creates a structure for achieving that position, would be well suited for this mission.*

## Perceptions (or Parent vs. Child Dynamic)

- Perceptions
- Fulfillment
- Job Motivation

Preconceived ideas of what makes a job good or desirable differed between parents and students. Parents believed that working for a well-known company or brand is a characteristic of a good job. In discussion with parents, “brand” was used as a catchall phrase to indicate: stability, financial independence, job security, and prestige. Students were more forward thinking and mentioned that a “good job” to them is one that would not be replaced by automation or technology in the future. Parents focused on the quality of the company and general job role as indicators of a “good job,” whereas the students looked at the specific micro-function of the job. The traditional characteristic assigned to a good job by parents contrasts with the more modern approach to thinking about a good job from students which considers the inevitable role that technology plays in their futures.

Happiness, contentedness, and fulfillment in whatever path the child would end up taking was brought up time and time again in the parent groups. In each parent and student group, responses to the question “what makes a ‘job good?’” or “why are you choosing X for your future?” resulted in mentioning happiness, doing something you enjoy, having an impact, and fulfillment, all before any discussion of salary or high pay.

*Insight: It would be prudent when marketing to students to focus on the nature of what a job entails and include*

*features that demonstrate the uniqueness of the work, imagery of a professional/office environment, stability, and positive societal impact. For parents, it would be better to focus on the names of companies that are hiring and what benefits they can provide to the students. In both cases incorporating accounts of happiness and fulfillment from others’ experiences in the field will be helpful.*

### Job Motivation

There was a reciprocal nature to parent and student motivations. Parents wanted their children to be happy and more successful than they were, and therefore, were willing to make sacrifices in their own lives by working extra jobs or jobs that they did not enjoy, in order to earn an income to support their child. Because of these sacrifices, they attached weight to the idea that their children should not settle for less, and should strive to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Students wanted to achieve success to make their parents happy and alleviate pressures that they face. Both groups believed that a four-year college would help to achieve this.

One high school female stated, “My parents don't want me to be like them. Like right now, they're struggling to pay bills and stuff. Like, if I were to become successful, like they want me to become ... probably make it easier on them, just make them a bit proud.”

## Risk

- Physical
- Flexibility
- Lack of Future

During the discussion of middle skill jobs, parents and students conveyed their hesitation in considering the listed job titles due to the risk involved. Several jobs were perceived as dangerous or hazardous and almost each group described “physical” or “hard work” as a characteristic of a middle skills job.

Parents also indicated that success stems from the ability to be flexible in work. With a four-year college degree, their child would acquire skills that are transferable across different fields, where pursuing a middle skills job would leave them “stuck” in one role.

Another form of risk was that pursuing a middle skills position would create an unstable future. Students expressed concern with being replaced by technology while parents believed the perceived physical nature of the work could result in an injury that would make them unable to continue down that path.

*Insight: The stereotypical description of these positions currently dominates what parents and students believe. The campaign should demonstrate longevity, stability, and safety as characteristics of middle skill jobs and utilize imagery of an office environment to contrast the idea that each of these jobs is physical.*

## Entrepreneurship

- Emerging Trend
- Job vs. Career

The idea of starting a business and working for oneself was an emerging trend in every group. Students and parents held entrepreneurship in high regard.

In relation to middle skills jobs almost each group mentioned that if a person worked as an electrician or a middle skills profession for someone other than themselves, it would be considered a job. As a *job*, the position is undesirable and does not include significant benefits. However, if someone were to create a business out of that position and work for themselves, it would

become a career. A career would be more fulfilling and lucrative.

*Insight: The skills learned in a middle skills position are the same whether a person calls it a “job” or a “career”. Emphasizing that these skills can be applied to a person’s own life once they receive on-the-job experience from a reputable business will be a point of interest to parents and students. Branding middle skills positions as providing the skills to establish entrepreneurial **careers** will symbolize longevity and stability.*

## Community College Audience

Students and parents alike stated that community college is useful in that it is a simpler route to completing common core classes required by four-year universities. Both parents and students described community colleges as a “stepping-stone” to a four-year college.

*Insight: Partnering with community colleges that have access to students that*

*have not yet chosen a particular career and are completing their basic classes will allow Upskill Houston to reach an untapped market of students. This might include partnering with them in the summer months when students from four-year colleges often take additional classes at community college while they are home.*

## Gender Differential

Male and female students agreed on some counts, but the differences in their answers to particular questions highlighted the stereotypical notions about gender. Female high school students exhibited a negative reaction when posed with a list of middle skill job titles. The only position on the list to which female students exhibited an interest was a Registered Nurse. This may be due to the fact that most of these students had an intuitive understanding about the responsibilities and characteristics of a nursing job, but were unaware of what some of the broader positions entailed.

When asked whether they believed certain benefits of middle skill jobs were true or false, responses between male students and female students were almost opposite.

For example, a majority of females did not believe that they could earn between \$40-\$60,000 in a middle skills position or that they had the opportunity for substantial raises or promotions. Males tended to have a better understanding of what the middle skills jobs that were presented to them entailed.

*Insight: Create awareness about the middle skills positions that are available by correlating them to a field of study or particular industry, and illustrating where and how they fit in everyday life. Registered Nurses are recognizable because of their high visibility role in every day society and their place in the healthcare field. Positions need to be presented as relatable, valuable, and impressive and performed by both males and females alike.*



**Outreach** Strategists  
LLC



**Web**

[outreachstrategists.com](http://outreachstrategists.com)



**Phone**

713-247-9600



**Address**

2727 Allen Parkway  
Suite 1300  
Houston, Texas  
77019

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