



Helping Students Navigate the Transition to Life After High School

Insights from Counselors and Out-of-School
Time Staff in Texas



Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Executive Summary](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Methods](#)

[Counselor Use of Future Focused Texas](#)

[Content](#)

[Dissemination](#)

[Extending the Reach](#)

[OST Staff Use of Future Focused Texas](#)

[Content](#)

[Dissemination](#)

[Extending the Reach](#)

[Looking Ahead](#)

Acknowledgments

The coauthors of this report are Alexandria Radford, Jessie Kerr-Vanderslice, Katherine Guyot, Mikael Rae, Jill Young, and Jaime Singer. We are particularly grateful for Joanne Blank's excellent design work and Ben Kalina's careful editing.

We would like to thank Majorie Murat from Dallas Afterschool and Byron Sanders from Big Thought for their thought partnership on this project. We would also like to thank the many counselors and out-of-school time staff that shared their perspectives through surveys and focus groups.

Finally, we give a very special thanks to Nadine Dechausay and Shareea Woods with the Communities Foundation of Texas for their thoughtful suggestions and feedback as we developed this project. We are also grateful to Communities Foundation of Texas for its financial support, which made this work possible.

Executive Summary

Launched in 2020 during COVID-19 related school closures, the Future Focused Texas (Future Focused TX) campaign is a collective initiative focused on providing free digital content for counselors to share with students to support their transition to life after high school. Future Focused TX provides free digital content for counselors to share with students. The Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) wanted to explore ways to extend the capacity and reach of counselors in helping young people transition to post-high school education. CFT partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to investigate (a) the current usefulness of the Future Focused TX platform to counselors in North Texas and (b) the potential use of the Future Focused TX platform and resources in out-of-school time (OST) programs in North Texas.

Through a counselor survey and focus group, we learned that high school counselors:

- find the Future Focused TX resources useful,
- see the value in sharing Future Focused TX resources with others (e.g., students, families),
- experience external barriers in using Future Focused TX materials (e.g., unreliable contact information for students and families, lack of access to social media platforms for materials dissemination), and
- would like additional materials to support students and parents through the post-high school transition (e.g., financial aid, supporting marginalized students, trauma, and mental health).

Through a survey of OST directors and several focus groups with OST staff, we learned that OST programs:

- provide a variety of content to participants related to their transition to life after high school,
- see the value in partnering with others to support students' post-high school transition,
- experience barriers in supporting students' post-high school transition, and
- would like additional materials to support students through the post-high school transition (e.g., financial literacy, mental health, jobs and vocational training, and transition to college).

Based on what we learned from counselors and OST programs, we see four needs that would help CFT in its desire to help students navigate the transition to life after high school and extend the reach of counselors through OST programs:

- hear directly from students and families about their experiences preparing for this transition to better inform CFT's strategy,
- improve dissemination strategies for reaching students and parents,
- increase OST staff's awareness of existing resources, and
- build OST program capacity to support post-high school transitions.

Introduction

Launched in 2020 during COVID-19 related school closures, the Future Focused Texas (Future Focused TX) campaign is a collective initiative focused on providing free digital content for counselors to share with students to support their transition to life after high school. With the return to in-person schooling, it is clear that students' need for information about transitioning to life after high school continues.

During the 2020–21 academic school year, the average high school counselor in Texas was responsible for 392 students—well above the 250 students recommended by the [American School Counselor Association](#). Moreover, high school counselors are expected to take on an array of [responsibilities](#), including high school course scheduling, academic testing, and assisting students with school and personal issues. These conditions can limit counselors' time to provide quality guidance to students in their transition to life after high school.

Meanwhile, students participate in a variety of programs outside of the traditional school day. Through such out-of-school time (OST) programs, staff work closely, and form trusting relationships, with students participating in these programs. OST staff also field questions from these participants about post-high school transition, but they do not have the same training and resources as counselors to help them in providing this information. Providing OST staff with vetted, prepackaged post-high school information they can share with their participants could extend counselor efforts and help better serve students.

This report highlights findings from surveys and focus groups with high school counselors and OST program directors and staff.



Methods

DURING THIS STUDY, AIR RESEARCHERS COLLECTED AND ANALYZED DATA FROM HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND OST PROGRAM STAFF.

Counselor Survey. The purpose of the counselor survey was to learn more about whether counselors have used the Future Focused TX resources, their feedback on the resources, and their thoughts on sharing the resources with other adults who support students, including OST staff. We administered the survey from May 31, 2021 through June 25, 2021. The survey targeted high school counselors in Texas who work directly with juniors and seniors. We recruited counselors to participate in the survey through direct partner outreach and dissemination. Specifically, AIR shared the survey link with CFT, Get Schooled, Dallas Afterschool Network, and other partners to disseminate with their networks. We received 101 responses to the survey and all respondents who shared their contact information received a \$20 electronic Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

Counselor Focus Groups. The purpose of the counselor focus groups was to dive deeper with counselors who have used the Future Focused TX resources and learn how they are currently using the resources, how those resources might be made more useful, and how the resources might be used with non-counselors, including OST staff. We conducted focus groups November 29, 2021 through January 14, 2022. The focus groups also targeted high school counselors in Texas who work directly with juniors and seniors. We invited counselors who responded to the survey and provided contact information to participate in focus groups. We also worked with Get Schooled to send several invitations through the Future Focused TX newsletter. Four current high school counselors who work directly with juniors and seniors in Texas and had previously used the Future Focused TX resources participated in focus groups. All participants received a \$60 electronic Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

OST Program Survey. The purpose of the OST survey was to learn more about OST program directors' perspectives on whether their programs currently share or would consider sharing post-high school resources with juniors and seniors. We administered the survey from October 25, 2021 through January 14, 2022. We targeted OST program directors in the North Texas/Dallas/Fort Worth area that work with high school juniors and seniors. To help with our outreach efforts, CFT provided an email list of its grantees that support youth, and AIR disseminated a unique survey link to this full list. We also solicited recommendations for survey participants from Dallas Afterschool Network and Big Thought. We received 49 responses from OST program directors whose programs work with juniors and seniors in the North Texas/Dallas/Fort Worth area. OST respondents shared that their programs represented a variety of focus areas, with the top three primary focus areas being leadership (35%), mentoring (28%), and academic support (27%). We offered respondents who shared their contact information a \$20 electronic Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

OST Focus Groups. The purpose of the OST focus groups was to further explore what resources OST program staff currently share or would consider sharing with juniors and seniors related to their post-high school options. We conducted focus groups December 1, 2021 through January 14, 2022. We targeted staff from OST programs whose directors completed the survey, indicated they served juniors and seniors in the North Texas/Dallas/Fort Worth area, and were sharing resources related to post-high school options. We also solicited recommendations for focus group participants from Dallas Afterschool Network and Big Thought. We invited OST program directors to participate in focus groups themselves or recommend staff to participate. Twenty-one OST staff participated in focus groups. All participants were staff from programs in the North Texas/Dallas/Fort Worth area that serve juniors and seniors and currently share or would share post-high school resources. All participants received a \$60 electronic Amazon gift card as a thank you for their time.

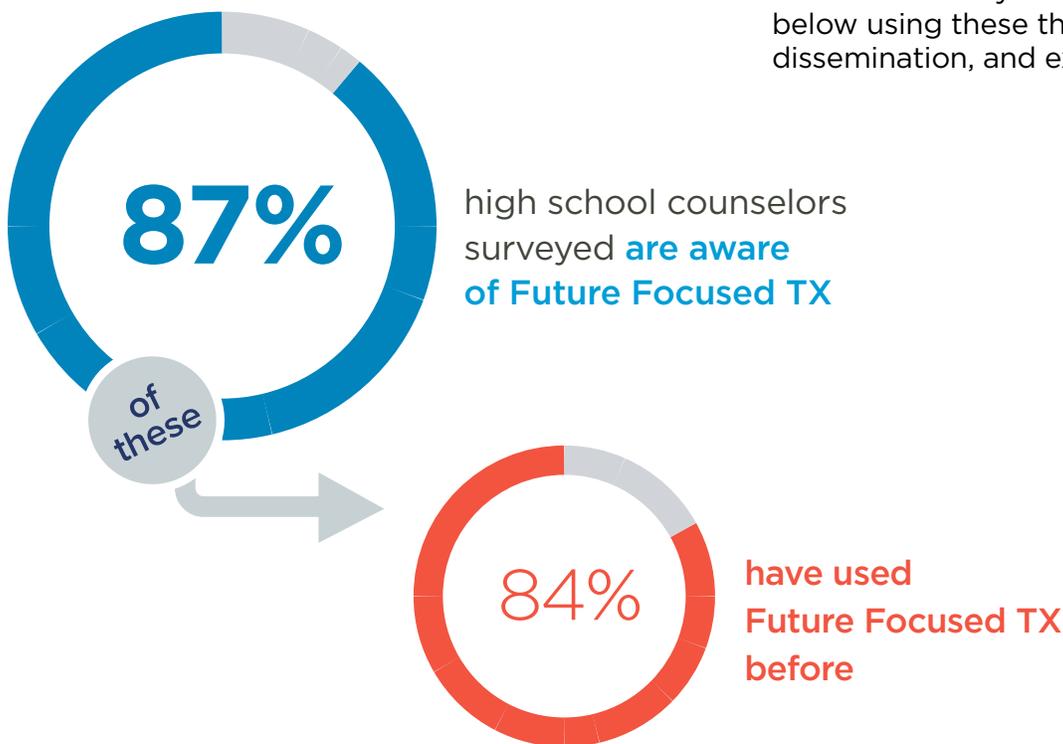
Analysis

AIR analyzed quantitative survey data using descriptive analysis to provide frequencies. We analyzed open-ended survey data, key informant interviews, and focus groups using qualitative methods to identify themes. Additionally, we analyzed extant data from Get Schooled on Future Focused TX materials, such as user survey data and resource downloads. We also reviewed 35 post-high school resources from four OST programs to identify common topics already covered in current resources and areas where more resources might be helpful.

Counselor Use of Future Focused Texas

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that most high school counselors surveyed are aware of Future Focused TX (87%) and have used Future Focused TX (84%). Counselors agree that the materials are helpful in their work. Future Focused TX offers a variety of sources and materials, including digital advising resources such as articles, videos, and downloadable content, as well as webinars and prewritten weekly emails for counselors to send to students. Counselors reported the most helpful resources were digital advising articles, the prewritten emails, and webinars.

Most counselors have heavy caseloads and struggle to provide regular individualized support to all their assigned students. Future Focused TX materials give counselors an efficient way to send relevant and timely post-high school materials to students and their parents. They agreed that the materials are user friendly in their design. They also felt these resources could be shared by other educators who are not trained as counselors (e.g., coaches and OST staff), although they struggled with how they might coordinate post-high school counseling services with educators in other roles. In addition, counselors offered recommendations and reflections relating to specific Future Focused TX content, dissemination activities, and strategies to extend their reach to more students and parents. We have organized the detailed high school counselor survey and focus group findings below using these three key themes: content, dissemination, and extending the reach.



Content

COUNSELORS FIND THE FUTURE FOCUSED TEXAS RESOURCES USEFUL

Counselors find Future Focused TX to be a time saver. Counselors frequently mentioned that their overwhelming caseloads make it difficult to respond to individual students' needs. Having access to Future Focused TX resources, however, allows them to efficiently locate and distribute content to students and parents. Given that the resources are organized in a month-by-month structure, counselors can pull from resources that apply directly to students' needs at the time. One counselor described the utility of Future Focused TX resources related to the college application process, stating, *"They follow a really nice transition of what senior year will look like, starting with building a college list, then applying to colleges, and then the financial aid and scholarship pieces. I like that it has a nice flow already to it, so you don't have to go and search and be like, 'Oh well, what should I be thinking about right now?'"*

Counselors also expressed how resources offered by Future Focused TX allow counselors to communicate with students efficiently and share the resources counselors found most helpful. Counselors shared in focus groups that the Future Focused TX prewritten emails and the resource library were two resources in particular that they could access and distribute with ease.

Counselors who responded to our survey indicated that the most useful resources were the Digital Advising Resources: articles and prewritten weekly emails texts/links to send to students.

COUNSELORS REPORT STUDENTS' TOP STRUGGLES



FAMILY/PERSONAL
FINANCIAL SITUATION



COMPLETING
THEIR FAFSA



PASSING THEIR
SENIOR YEAR



FILLING OUT
COLLEGE
APPLICATIONS



IT ISSUES
(INTERNET
CONNECTIVITY,
COMPUTER ISSUES)



MENTAL HEALTH/
SELF CARE

Data from Get Schooled highlight the content that was most frequently downloaded by Texas users, which included the following:



DOWNLOADS

College List Builder

684

FAFSA Filed,
Now What Infographic

311

Apply Texas Checklist

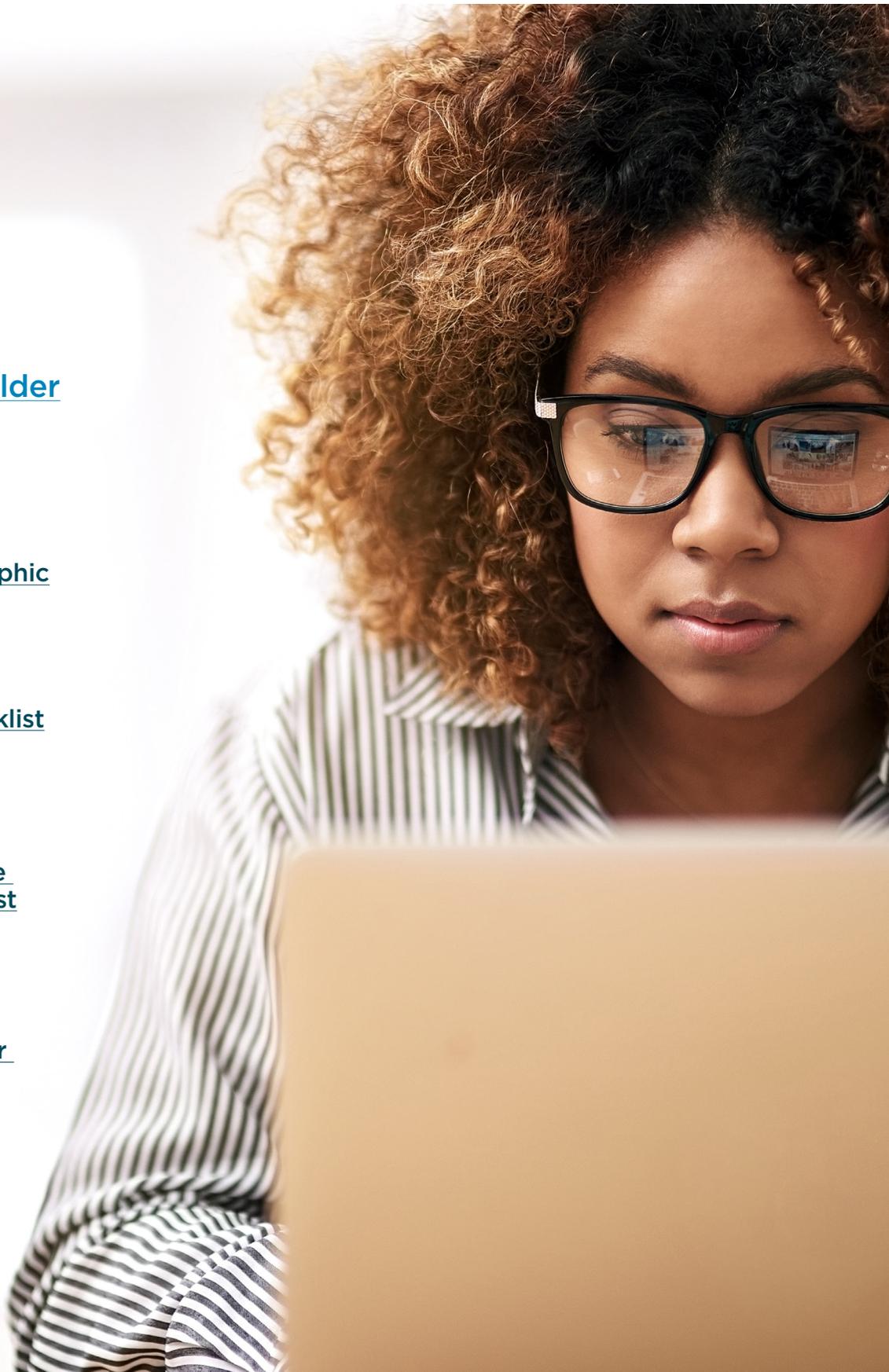
295

Summer Before
College Checklist

291

Ways to Pay for
College Flyer

173



COUNSELORS REQUESTED ADDITIONAL MATERIALS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND PARENTS IN POST-HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

Counselors requested additional information about other post-high school options.

Counselors highlighted a lack of resources pertaining to work and internship opportunities. Counselors also noted that there could be benefits to discussing the college process, trade schools, and other post-high school options earlier than senior year. One counselor shed light on the importance of piquing students' interest in exploring post-high school options, stating, *"If they haven't bought into the idea of a post-high school plan by senior year, it's really hard to engage them and get them to buy into that."*

Counselors requested more materials focused on financial aid for students and parents.

Counselors most frequently reported that they need easily sharable content about scholarships (63%) and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (51%), and 49% rated completing the FAFSA among their students' top three struggles. Specifically, counselors believed that they could better inform students and parents about the FAFSA and scholarships if there were more materials that discussed the importance of financial aid in all circumstances but especially in case of unpredictable life events. Counselors shared that many students and parents ignore FAFSA because they do not realize they are eligible for financial aid. One counselor in particular said, *"I also talk to parents about how life happens, so having that FAFSA already on file allows you to contact the financial aid office and do a change in circumstance, which gets you access to money that you may not have been eligible for a lot quicker."*

Counselors also requested materials that are more inclusive for marginalized students.

Counselors noted that in many cases, they were not equipped to provide support to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students and students who are experiencing homelessness. Additionally, students from these groups are often more hesitant to come to counselors for assistance. To overcome this challenge, one counselor recommended that Future Focused TX create one-pagers specifically for students from marginalized backgrounds that students and parents can access independently or a counselor can access and distribute.

Counselors requested supports for addressing mental health and trauma for students.

They emphasized the importance of addressing topics related to mental health with students as part of the post-high school planning process. Counselors prefer to handle the conversations themselves instead of delegating the duties to other staff. Forty-three percent of survey respondents reported that they need easily sharable content about self-care and mental health, and 24% rated mental health and self-care among their students' top three struggles.



24% of counselors reported **mental health and self-care** among their students' top 3 struggles.

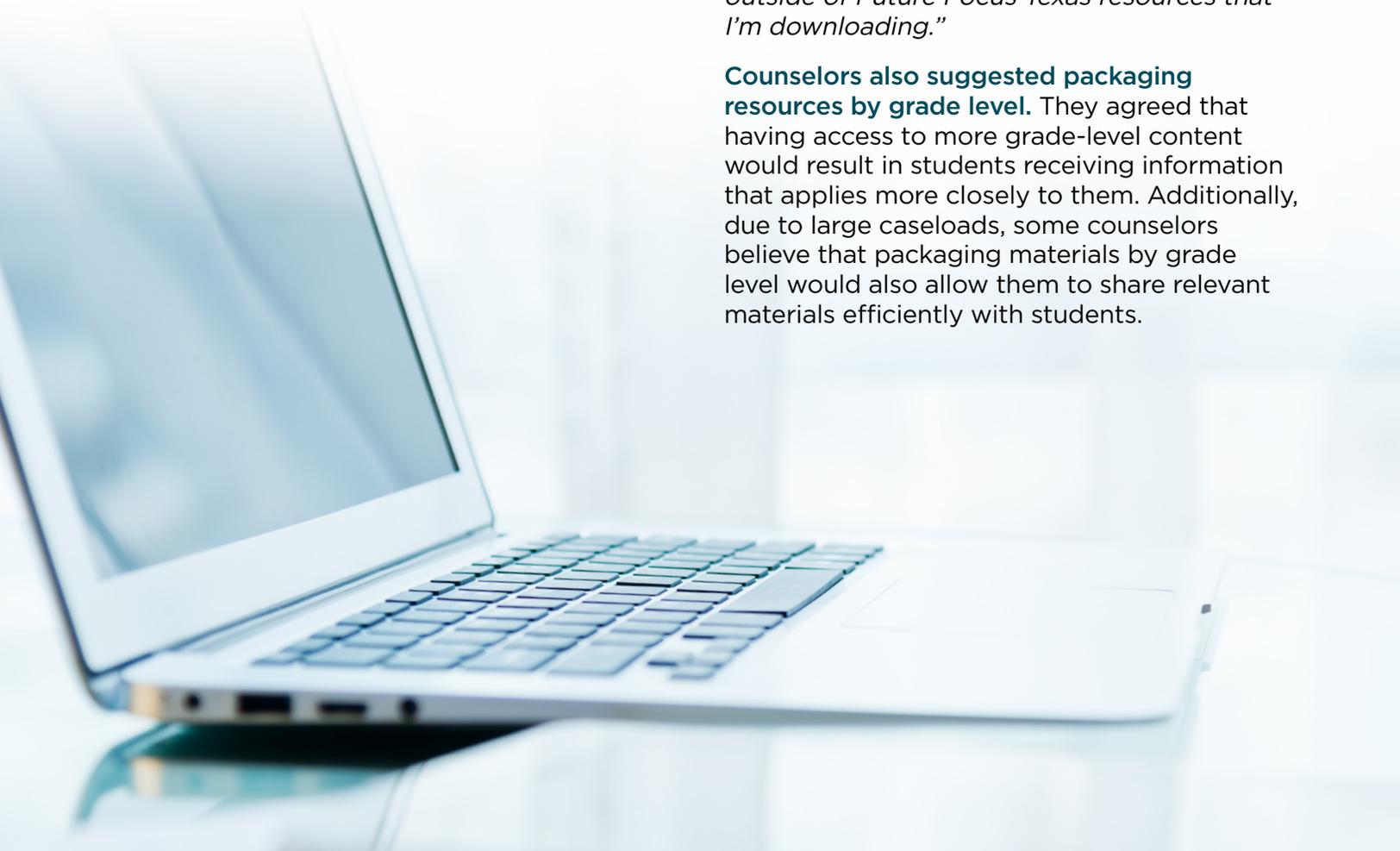
Dissemination

COUNSELORS EXPERIENCE EXTERNAL BARRIERS IN USING FUTURE FOCUSED TEXAS MATERIALS

Counselors find it difficult to track student impact and understand how students access and engage with resources. Tracking students' use of resources is difficult for counselors. One counselor described the benefits and drawbacks of sending out a newsletter and said, *"I use a lot of [Future Focused TX resources] on the newsletter that I send out, so I can see how many people have accessed that newsletter [though] I can't see exactly who has [accessed it]."* Other counselors discussed their ability to track student engagement with material on Instagram, which allows them to see who has accessed content. Even when counselors are able to capture some information on who has viewed materials, they still do not know how students are engaging with, absorbing, and using them.

The content that is most useful also depends on counselors' intended audience. Counselors reported they often consider which resources are best suited for students and parents. Given that students engage with social media and digital content, counselors find success distributing resources to students via social media and text groups like GroupMe and Remind. Counselors had mixed opinions regarding which method is most effective to reach parents but mostly agreed that parents are more likely than students to read emails and physical resources. One counselor said, *"I like handouts, especially with parents, because sometimes you can't get super close with parents and say, 'Look at my computer screen.' Having a handout is great to work with parents to be like, 'Let's walk through this handout together.' I really love Texas On Course resources, and that's probably my go-to outside of Future Focus Texas resources that I'm downloading."*

Counselors also suggested packaging resources by grade level. They agreed that having access to more grade-level content would result in students receiving information that applies more closely to them. Additionally, due to large caseloads, some counselors believe that packaging materials by grade level would also allow them to share relevant materials efficiently with students.

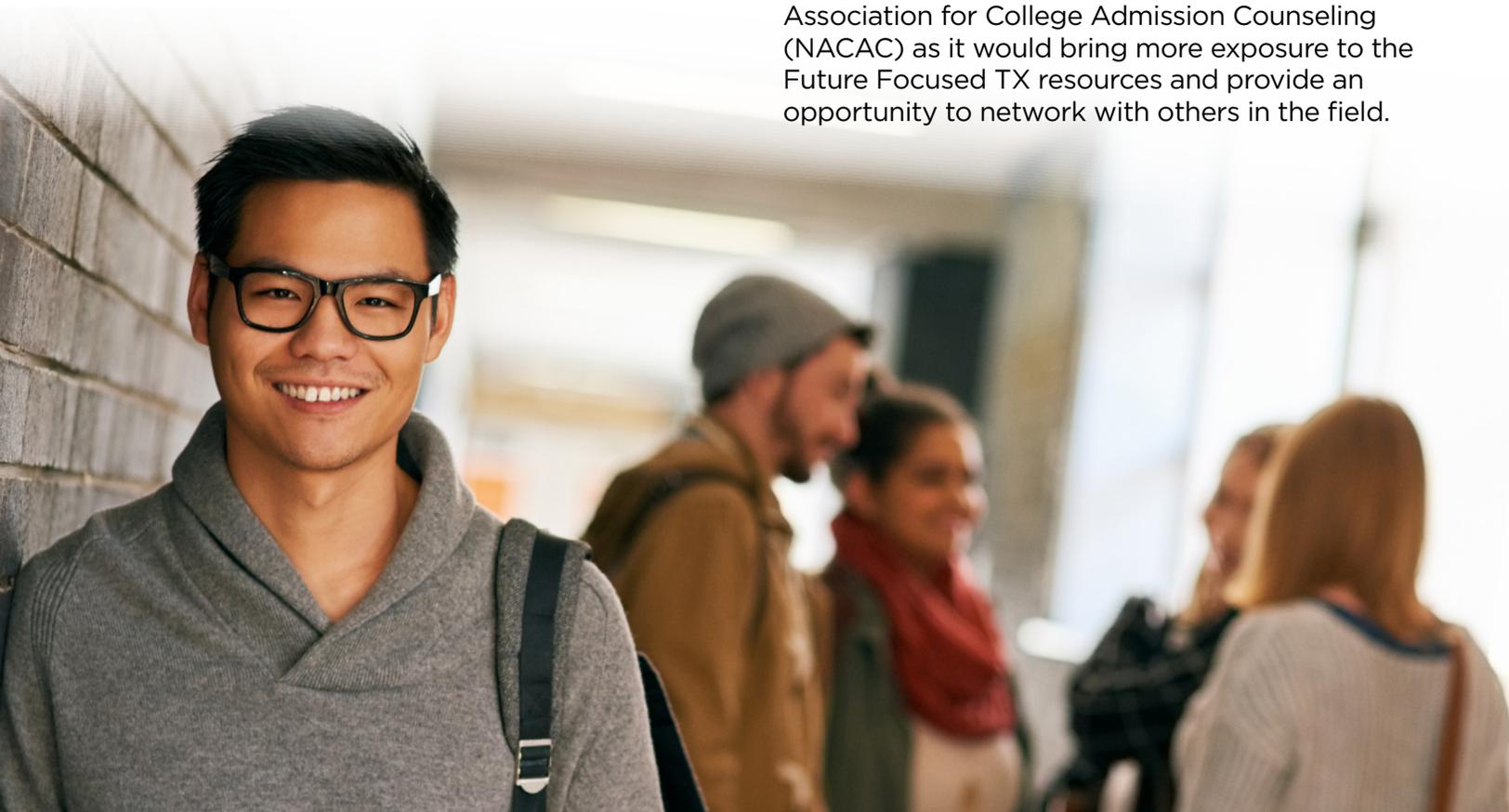


Extending the Reach

COUNSELORS SEE THE VALUE IN SHARING FUTURE FOCUSED TEXAS RESOURCES WITH OTHERS

Counselors agreed that coaches, fine arts teachers, and other staff who spend a significant amount of time with students should also have access to Future Focused TX resources so they can share them with students. Most counselors who have used Future Focused TX's Digital Advising Resources report that they have already shared these resources with other counselors at their school (82%), counselors at other schools (67%), and college access organizations (67%). Counselors also report having shared these resources with teachers (52%), sports coaches (48%), and OST providers or staff (48%).

Counselors are interested in partnering with others to support post-high school transition but are unsure of how to do it. Counselors agreed that it is important to create a community that supports students in their post-high school journey. One aspect of this process involves building from within by creating a community beyond the counselor's office that cares about college and career readiness and knows how to apply resources to support students in achieving their goals. One counselor recommended that Future Focused TX could provide professional development resources to educate teachers, coaches, social workers, OST staff, and community organizations on how to best support students. In addition, counselors discussed the importance of expanding the reach of Future Focused TX by collaborating with other initiatives such as Texas On Course. One counselor also suggested exhibiting at conferences held by organizations such as the Texas Association for College Admission Counseling (TACAC) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) as it would bring more exposure to the Future Focused TX resources and provide an opportunity to network with others in the field.



OST Staff Use of Future Focused Texas

Our survey and focus groups indicated that OST programs are already providing information to support participants' post-high school transition and are open to new materials and approaches (Figure 1). Specifically, 88% of surveyed OST program directors reported that their programs already support juniors' and seniors' transitions to life after high school. As for the specific types of support offered, 60% of programs share digital resources with students and 40% share print resources. Almost half (46%) went a step further, incorporating post-high school materials into their programs.

OST programs that participated in focus groups were similar in how they viewed their role. For example, participating OST programs emphasized high-touch relational support for students and their parents, including one-on-one support, in-person interactions, and ongoing connections to students throughout high school and sometimes beyond. One participant shared that *"oftentimes there's not enough time [in school] to actually sit down and work on those scholarships or to work on those applications or to work on that financial aid and submit it. So that for us is where we kind of fill the gap with our students."*

OST programs support parents and students in their transition in a variety of ways. Among the activities OST staff shared were helping students apply for financial aid and fill out college applications, guiding students to develop interests in academic subjects and careers they may pursue after high school, connecting students with mentors, teaching life skills (such as financial literacy and cooking), and providing mental health supports. Some programs offered direct support to parents, hosting parent engagement events and engaging with parents over social media to offer guidance about the college application process.

Similar to high school counselors, OST staff shared recommendations and reflections relating to specific Future Focused TX content, dissemination activities, and strategies to extend their reach to more students and parents. We have organized the detailed OST staff survey and focus group findings below using these three key themes: content, dissemination, and extending the reach.

FIGURE 1. OST PROGRAMS SUPPORT STUDENTS' POST-HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

SHARE DIGITAL RESOURCES WITH STUDENTS

60%

INCORPORATE POST-HIGH SCHOOL MATERIALS INTO OUR PROGRAMS

46%

SHARE PRINT RESOURCES WITH STUDENTS

40%

OFFER SPECIAL POST-HIGH SCHOOL SUPPORT OUTSIDE OF OUR PROGRAMS

33%

Note. N = 49

Content

OST PROGRAMS ARE PROVIDING A VARIETY OF CONTENT TO PARTICIPANTS

OST programs share information with students to support their post-high school transition.

Among programs that share post-high school materials with students, the survey revealed that 74% share materials about further education and training options (e.g., four-year college, community college, and trade school) and 61% share materials about applying for college. Half (53%) report sharing materials about financial aid and other ways of paying for college or training, and almost half (45%) share materials related to work, including military service. A review of materials OST programs shared with AIR indicated that most resources were dedicated to either career preparation or college admissions. Other resources were related to college and career readiness, financial literacy, and test preparation.

OST programs share resources from other organizations as well as create their own.

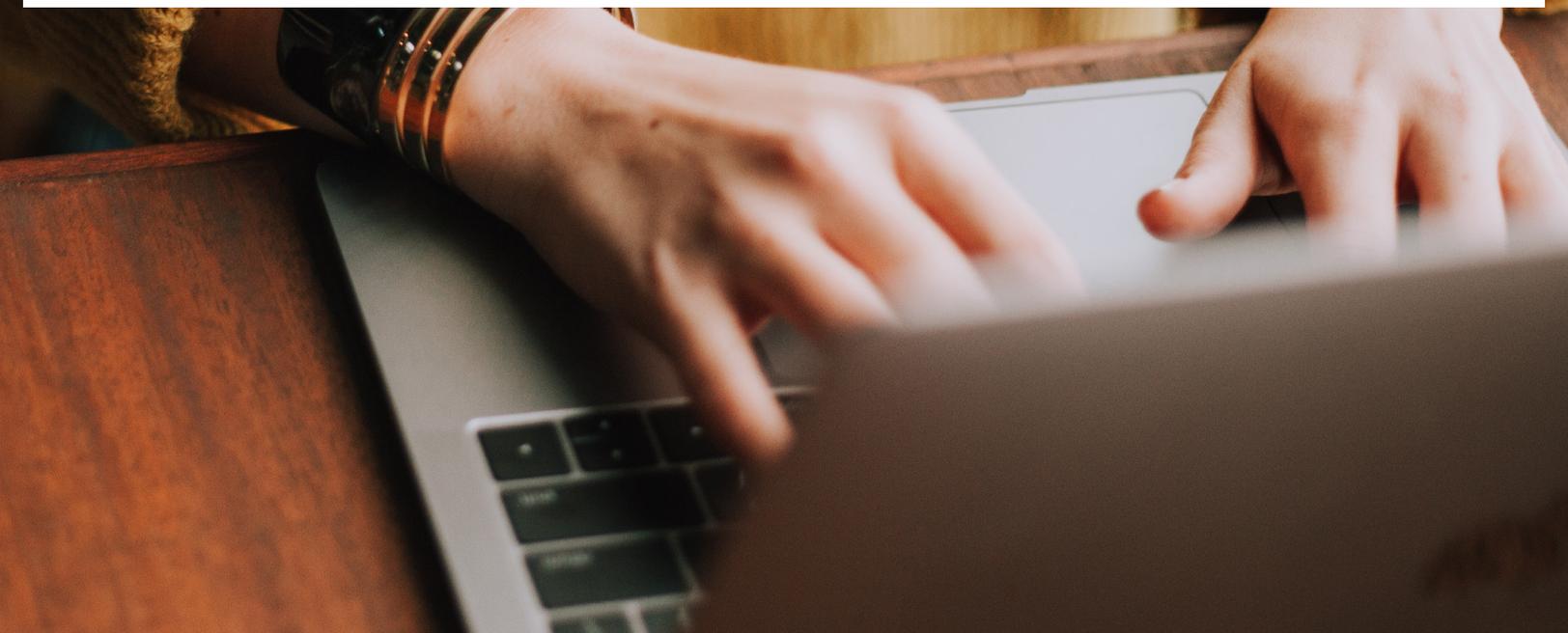
Among OST programs that share post-high school materials with students, 67% reported that they create their own post-high school materials, and 60% use materials created by other organizations. The most common sources of content from this document review were the Texas Workforce Commission and the University of Texas Youth Engagement Center–Dallas. Several focus group participants described modifying resources from other organizations (including Future Focused TX) to turn them into a social media post, a booklet, or a presentation. Additionally, three respondents said that their post-high school materials come directly from colleges and universities, such as fliers handed out during a visit from a college admissions representative or when students are visiting college campuses.



OST PROGRAMS HIGHLIGHTED SPECIFIC AREAS WHERE THEIR PARTICIPANTS NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

OST programs requested more resources on financial literacy. Focus group participants emphasized that their students could use additional support in financial literacy and other life skills, such as how to open a checking or savings account, repay loans, build credit, and cook basic dishes. In response to an open-ended survey question about topics on which OST programs would like prepackaged, research-based post-high school materials, program directors most frequently requested materials about life skills, such as financial literacy and “soft skills” to help with post-high school transitions. One focus group participant reported that in their organization’s conversations with college students, students say that *“they wish they had more basic life skills and more soft skills before they hit the campus; that they felt underprepared.”* Another said that not all students will learn about financial literacy from their parents or in school and suggested that OST programs could have these conversations with students.

OST programs also requested additional resources for mental health supports. Focus group participants discussed the need for mental health supports, especially for students of color. For example, two participants discussed the importance of addressing stigma that students of color may experience when seeking mental health services. Another said that it would be helpful for OST programs to have a list of mental health resources so that they can refer students to free or low-cost services or provide students with information to locate those services on their own. In open-ended survey responses, four OST program directors said that they would like to have prepackaged, research-based post-high school materials about mental health, especially as this relates to navigating post-high school transitions.



OST programs requested information about jobs, careers, and vocational training opportunities or internships.

In open-ended survey comments, five OST program directors reported that their organizations most need resources related to jobs and careers, especially vocational training opportunities and internships. More than three quarters of survey respondents reported that their organizations would share information about work-related options (e.g., military service, service programs, and jobs) if prepackaged, research-based post-high school materials on this topic were provided. In focus groups, several participants mentioned that resources about post-high school opportunities should include pathways other than four-year colleges, such as the military or technical schools.

OST programs shared mixed feedback about needing additional resources related to the transition to college.

In survey results, 56% of OST program directors reported that a lack of readily available post-high school materials poses a barrier to their programs sharing these materials with students, and 87% said that they would share prepackaged, research-based materials about further education and training options with students if these materials were provided. Few focus group participants, however, mentioned a need for materials related to the transition to college except as this relates to life skills, financial literacy, mental health, and other topics discussed above. Several focus group participants reported that their organizations already have sufficient access to materials about the transition to college. As one person said, *“I don’t think the problem is a lack of resources. There are a million and five resources out in the community.”*

Instead, focus group participants tended to emphasize challenges with student engagement (discussed below) and a need for more staff who are trained on resources related to post-high school transitions. Similarly, in response to an open-ended survey question about what kinds of support their organizations most need to support juniors and seniors in their transitions after high school, the majority of program directors frequently mentioned a need for more funding, staff, volunteers, and training opportunities to help better support students’ post-high school transitions, although several others did mention that they could use more prepackaged materials related to post-high school transitions.



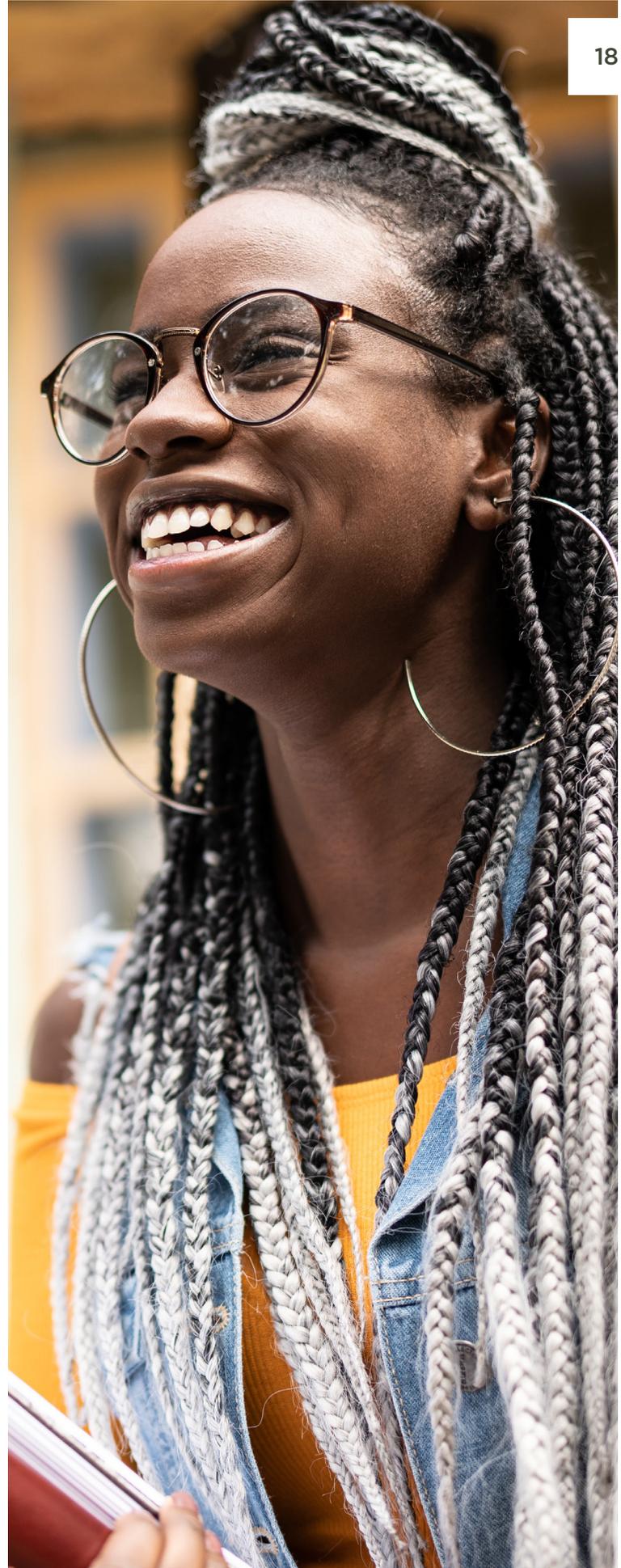
56% of OST program directors reported that a **lack of readily available post-high school materials poses a barrier** to their programs sharing these materials with students



OST programs support students with varying needs and access to information. Focus group participants emphasized that OST programs must address the needs of a broad student group with varying access to other sources of information about post-high school opportunities. As one participant said, *“We have some kids who come from schools that are pretty high academic achieving schools, they have a lot of [college] resources, so their needs might be more related to ... scholarships. We have other kids who have literally no idea where to start.”* Inequality in students’ prior exposure to information about post-high school transitions can make it challenging for OST programs to provide information and services that are relevant to all their participating students, according to focus group results. OST program staff also discussed the importance of understanding students’ cultural context when conducting outreach to design content strategies based on students’ needs. As one survey respondent wrote, *“You can’t create a prepackaged material to fit all. A White student north of downtown has a completely different experience, knowledge base than a Black student south of downtown or a Latin student in West Dallas.”* Additionally, OST programs indicated that they often serve a wide age group and may benefit from resources that are applicable to multiple grade levels.



“You can’t create a prepackaged material to fit all. A White student north of downtown has a completely different experience, knowledge base than a Black student south of downtown or a Latin student in West Dallas.”



Dissemination

OST PROGRAMS EXPERIENCE BARRIERS IN SUPPORTING PARTICIPANTS' POST-HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

OST programs have had more difficulty accessing students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in part, because many programs that previously relied on in-person contact with students were unable to visit schools due to pandemic-related restrictions. As one OST program staff member explained, *“I think a lot of our jobs consists of relationship building, and unfortunately we haven’t been able to do that [during the pandemic], so it’s definitely been more difficult to get stuff into [students’] hands.”* Several focus group participants indicated that students had become less responsive to emails and text messages from OST staff and/or that overall participation in their programs had declined since the beginning of the pandemic. Although survey results suggest that email is the most common way that OST programs share post-high school materials with juniors and seniors, focus group participants tended to agree that email is not an effective way to reach students. Another focus group participant said that a major barrier to consistent communication is that students do not always have access to the Internet or mobile data plans.

OST staff also described broader challenges with getting students engaged with post-high school materials even when students may open an email or text message containing those materials. For instance, one person suggested that their organization’s students have limited mental bandwidth to engage with the many resources they receive about post-high school transitions, whether in person or over text messages: *“We’re pushing [resources] out, but even if they’re looking at it, they’re not engaged enough or have that motivation to receive all of the things that are being shared with them.”* Focus group participants tended to agree that students will “click off” (or become disengaged) when they receive text-heavy materials. As one person said, *“You have too many words, and they’re just done.”*

OST programs shared that dissemination efforts may be less effective because students have several other demands on their time. Some students have responsibilities outside of school, such as working to help support their parents and taking care of younger siblings, that make it challenging for them to devote time to engaging with post-high school materials, according to focus group results. OST programs may only see students *“every couple of weeks whenever they have that day off [from work],”* one person said. Another said that home responsibilities compete for students’ attention: *“I have a student who will be cooking dinner while she’s on Zoom [for OST programming], so it’s just being able to balance all of those responsibilities, while also trying to plan for their futures.”*



“We’re pushing [resources] out, but even if they’re looking at it, they’re not engaged enough or have that motivation to receive all of the things that are being shared with them.”

Extending the Reach

OST PROGRAMS SEE THE VALUE IN PARTNERING WITH OTHERS TO SUPPORT PARTICIPANTS IN THEIR POST-HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION

OST programs are already partnering with other organizations to support students' post-high school transition. Many already partner with universities. One organization brings students to college campuses to gain exposure to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) coursework and careers. Similarly, in open-ended survey comments, two respondents shared that their programs focus on connecting students with university and/or community partners to plan for post-high school transitions. For example, one said, *"We connect them with university recruiters, deans, & professors to help in their college selection."*

OST programs would like to partner with high schools. Several focus group participants expressed that they would like to work more closely with high schools, such as by maintaining communication with guidance counselors about the post-high school resources that students are receiving from various sources and reinforcing each other's messaging. One participant wanted guidance counselors to know that *"we're actually your backup. ... The things you can't talk to the students about in the classroom or while they're in school, we're actually here to help you do that."* OST programs, however, have limited communication with school staff, so OST programs sometimes lack information (e.g., about post-high school resources that students already receive in school) that would help to identify needed supports. Two focus group participants shared that their organizations' emails to staff or students are sometimes blocked by districts' spam filters. Others said that school staff may be unsure about the role of OST programs or whether OST programs are authorized to interact with students. As a result, OST staff sometimes perceive that they are operating on "old information" and that there is *"a disconnect between the school and what we do."*

OST programs shared that students need support beyond high school graduation, both to assist students who are transitioning to a post-high school setting and to provide guidance to students who did not pursue education or training immediately after graduation. Some OST programs already follow up with students after high school, as evidenced by one focus group participant who said, *"One of the things we're doing is keeping up with the kids, no matter their chosen vocation. Regardless of if they go to college or the military, we stay with them until completion of vocational skills, but then we still talk to them and let them know they have resources available through us. We try to follow them postgraduation to make sure they're on track to achieve their goals."* Another shared that their program stays in contact with students after they enter college and connects them with alumni mentors.



"We connect them with university recruiters, deans, & professors to help in their college selection."

Looking Ahead

Based on what we learned from counselors and OST staff, we see four needs that would help CFT in its desire to help students navigate the transition to life after high school and extend the reach of counseling services through OST programs.

First, we must connect directly with students to learn more about their post-high school transition planning and decision-making. We heard from counselors and OST programs about their perspectives on what supports and resources students need. A strong and successful strategy going forward, however, should include more direct participation from students and their families to get a deeper understanding of student aspirations, needs, and decision-making around post high school. In addition, deeper engagement with the “clients” (students and their families) for transition supports could help outline a more expansive vision of possible post-high school transitions and collect information about effective methods for student and family communication and connection. Information from these extended data collection activities could be broken down by student and family characteristics, which could inform targeted approaches for information sharing and “higher touch” counseling activities in OST (e.g., direct service programming).



Second, learning from student and family information-gathering activities should be shared with OST and school counseling staff to help inform programming and resource dissemination activities in the future. Since student and family needs will vary, we need to develop data collection strategies as usable and easy-to-replicate templates. This will allow OST staff and counselors to collect ongoing information within their schools and populations to optimize the supports offered and the dissemination strategies used to support students' transition.

Third, we need to increase OST programs' awareness of existing resources. OST programs are already supporting students in their post-high school transition by sharing resources, often creating their own or using other organizations' resources. But OST programs are usually not aware of Future Focused TX resources and the related offerings and initiatives of Future Focused TX partners. This is a missed opportunity to expand the reach and impact of existing high-quality transition materials. Compared with school-day counseling, OST programs often have different types of relationships with families and

students, as well as different approach options for communication and programming. For example, some OST focus group participants have found that disseminating short, user-friendly content over social media or group chats can be an effective way to reach students who are not responsive to more traditional methods of contact. These communication channels are not typically open to school-day staff, so expanding resource connections to OST programs can open up new options for distributing materials and offering supports.

Last, we need to build OST program capacity to support post-high school transitions. Both counselors and OST programs noted the difficulty in reaching all students, and that students vary in their information needs and access. To reach the populations sought, passively providing information is often not enough. Helping OST programs build their capacity to use their unique relationships with students and families to provide greater support will further extend counselors' reach and aid students in successfully navigating this transition.





Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research on important social issues and delivers technical assistance, both domestically and internationally, in the areas of education, health, and workforce productivity.