

SCHOLARSHIP

# Focus Group

Findings



Blandin Foundation™  
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

# INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of its goal to better support youth in rural Minnesota, Blandin Foundation Scholarships sought to learn from youth about the narratives they hold around higher education and the reasons driving their decision to pursue or not pursue post-secondary education. Staff conducted structured listening sessions in February-April 2024 at nine high schools across Blandin's Local Giving Area to answer the following research questions:

- » What does the process of career discernment and development look like for high school-aged youth? What resources are available to them, and what do they use?
- » What perceptions do youth have about higher education and their community? What has shaped these perceptions?
- » What reasons do youth have for choosing to not pursue higher education?

The responses to those questions can help Blandin Foundation understand what information students need as well as inform planning on how to best support youth in their decisions about education beyond high school.



# METHODS

**A semi-structured question guide was created to answer the research questions described above.** Staff at the Blandin Foundation worked with guidance counselors at each school in Blandin's Local Giving Area to recruit students for the listening sessions. We aimed to get a student group with diverse perspectives that was as representative of the high school student body as possible. Following best practices for participatory data collection, Blandin obtained parental consent forms for students under the age of 18 and students received a \$50 gift card to thank them for their time.

**Ten 2-hour listening sessions were conducted at the following high schools:** Blackduck, Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, Deer River, Grand Rapids (two separate sessions), Hill City, Nashwauk-Keewatin, Northern Lights Community School, Northland (Remer) and Northome.

A few schools in Blandin's Local Giving Area (Greenway and Bigfork) did not recruit students to hold a listening session.

**Fifty-one students attended the ten listening sessions.** The number of students at each listening session ranged from two to eight, with an average of five students per session. A staff member from the Blandin Foundation facilitated each session and another staff member took detailed notes.

Notes from each session were inductively coded following a constant comparison process and key themes were developed from these codes.





# FINDINGS

**What does the process of career discernment and development look like for high school-aged youth? What resources are available to them and what do they use?**

- » **Students suggested that they often begin thinking about careers earlier in life but make decisions about higher education later in their high school career.** Rather than thinking about higher education in the abstract, most students start by thinking about what they want to do and then think about what kind of education, if any, is required for that career path.
- » **Students indicated that choosing a career path is confusing.** They find it challenging to decide on a career and recognize that it is a big decision. They also indicated that they are confused about the requirements for education and training that a profession might require.
- » **A primary way that youth learn about careers outside of school is independent, internet-based research.** Students indicate that they use internet search engines to get information about careers and guide their career planning.
- » **While in school, students mentioned a variety of ways they explore career options.** Some schools offer classes specifically designed to help them explore opportunities. Some schools also incorporate activities like field trips, job talks, and career exploration days. A few students mentioned a decrease in the offerings provided by schools since COVID-19.
- » **Students often referenced teachers and school counselors as resources for career guidance in both formal and informal ways.** They mentioned a few specific ways people in those roles provide support, including setting up college visits, holding meetings to talk about scholarships, and connecting students to people in their networks. Students also mentioned extracurricular activities such as FFA or sports that exposed them to different career options.

**I guess what I'm really wondering is like, is this really what I want to go for and do with my life? Like, how do I know if this is the right job or career?**

FINDINGS



## What perceptions do youth have about higher education and what has shaped those perceptions?

- » Students expressed a belief that continuing education beyond high school presented an opportunity for increased earning potential and expanded career choices. Some said that higher education will increase their knowledge and skills and will increase their personal satisfaction and individual benefits. Some also believe that pursuing post-secondary education will expose them to new places, people and experiences.
- » Students indicated that the narratives they hold about higher education are influenced by family, peers, and community. Many students said they were encouraged by those in their families and community to continue their education. People in their lives often tend to promote a range of post-secondary options, such as certificates, trades and other options that aren't just four-year schools.

Room and board is expensive. Scholarships help with books and tuition but they don't pay for living costs. Even when you share a dorm, it's an arm and a leg.

## What reasons do youth have for not pursuing higher education?

- » While families and communities tend to encourage these students to pursue post-secondary education, the narratives can also be cautionary. Students feel confused as they hear their families and community talk about the cost of college and that it might not be worth it if they can find jobs that pay as well while not requiring a degree.
- » Cost was far and away the most common barrier to pursuing post-secondary education expressed by students. Students recognized that the cost of higher education includes things other than just tuition, like books, housing and transportation. When asked to imagine that higher education was free, the majority of students said they would definitely go. They indicated that it removed the pressure and stress of feeling like they had to make the right decisions before attending.
- » Some students said that leaving home and being far away from family were also barriers to pursuing post-secondary education. Students acknowledged that many colleges are far away from their homes, requiring them to leave to pursue credentials. Nearly half of the students indicated that they were sure or somewhat sure that they wanted to stay in or come back to their community long-term. There were also many that indicated that, while they didn't want to return to their specific community, they wanted to return to the region. Their reasons for this were typically related to family and friends as well as recognizing their communities as supportive places.
- » Self-doubt and personal mental health challenges pose barriers for students entering post-secondary education. Students believe that higher education will be a lot of work and they worry about not being prepared for more difficult classes. They expressed anxiety surrounding the need to make the "right decision" early on for financial reasons and to feel that they would not waste time and money on classes they did not need.



# DISCUSSION

**Students often make their postsecondary educational plans based on career choice, but career exploration and development opportunities vary.**

The larger narrative expressed through these conversations is that students feel that choosing the right career path is hard and students perceive that a career path needs to be certain before pursuing post-secondary education because it is too expensive to not have figured out ahead of time.

According to 2017 [National Center for Education Statistics data](#), approximately 30 percent of students who enrolled in an associate's or bachelor's degree program who declared a major had changed their major at least once within the first three years of their enrollment. It is not uncommon that the path through higher education is non-linear.

To assist in alleviating some of the pressure that students feel about choosing the "right path", narratives should acknowledge this non-linear path and encourage students that their entry into higher education comes with exploration of a variety of subjects to help them determine where their interests may lie. Parents, teachers, counselors and community members can help students understand that they do not have to be fully confident and committed to a certain career path to get started on the next level of their educational journey.

What is clear from both the discussions with students as well as discussions with high school counselors is that there is no standardized or uniform formal process for career development among schools. Students often turn to online sources such as Google to conduct independent research about careers.

Students' ability to receive and benefit from in-school career counseling may be limited by a large gap in school counselor capacity. Minnesota currently ranks 48th in the United States for student to counselor ratios. While the [American Student Counselor Association recommends a 250:1](#) student to counselor ratio, [Minnesota's school-to-counselor ratio](#) more than doubles that with 544 students for every counselor. This ratio, paired with increased mental health concerns, behavioral intervention needs, and other counselor expectations leaves little room for school counselors to focus on career exploration and development.

There is growing research on the importance of early career exploration. A study by [Godbey and Gordon \(2019\)](#) highlights the importance of early career exploration as a time where, developmentally, students are well-positioned to "interact in meaningful ways with career-based activities" as they are increasingly aware of their own interests, abilities and values. The study also presents some of the barriers to providing this type of programming systematically. Barriers presented include a lack of funding by states for positions devoted exclusively to career development in middle school, a lack of school counselors, as well as lack of parental involvement, even though parents feel that career planning should happen at a younger age.

*When I started thinking about it, it wasn't college, moreso it was a career path and then thinking about college after that.*

DISCUSSION



## The cost of college and having to leave home are primary barriers to pursuing postsecondary education.

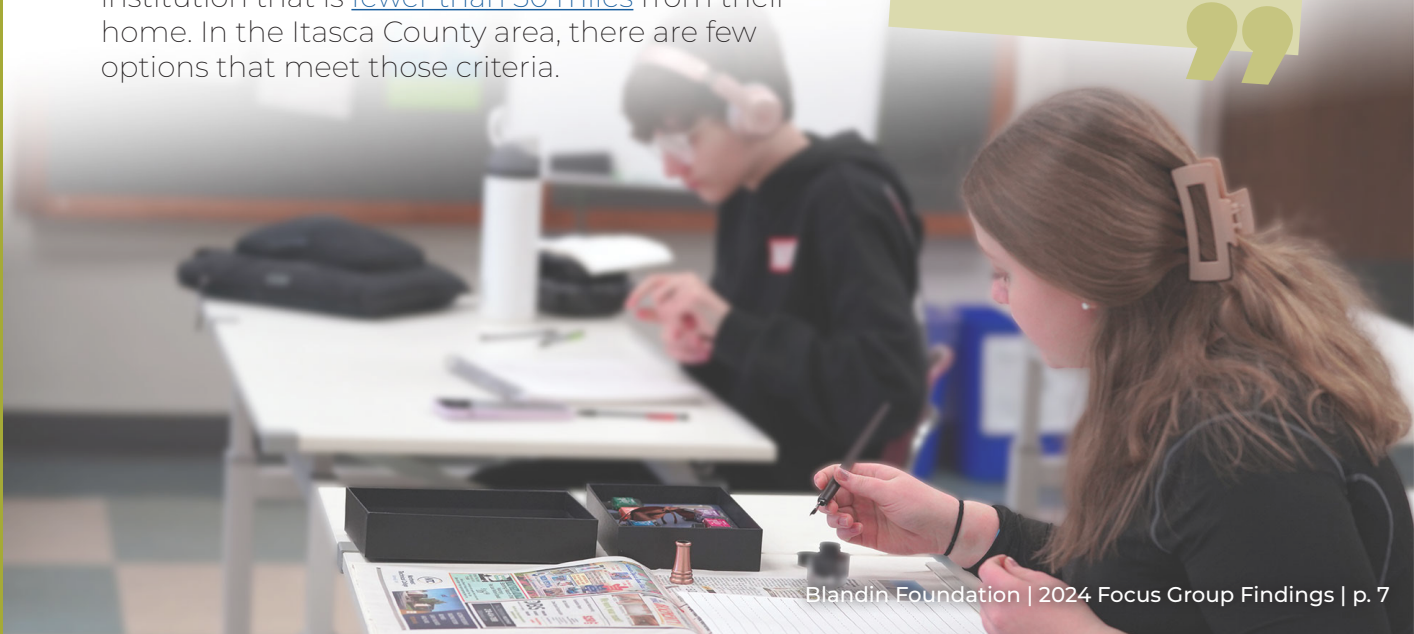
**Free college would almost completely eliminate the reasons that I am on the fence. If it was free, I wouldn't have worries and would feel more comfortable going.**

Students identified the cost of college and the potential of incurring debt as the biggest barriers to pursuing higher education. Students receive mixed messages from their peers, family and community regarding the cost of higher education. They understand the importance of postsecondary education and the opportunities it offers but hear from others that it is too expensive and may not be worth it. Students indicate anxiety and fear around attending postsecondary education which partially stems from the uncertainty of whether it is the right decision. When asked to consider a hypothetical scenario where they knew that post-secondary education would be completely free, students overwhelmingly indicated that would change their mindset and they would definitely go.

In Minnesota, even with Pell Grant funding and a robust state grant program, [the net cost of attendance](#) (the amount remaining after all other financial aid has been applied) is still out of reach for many, with low-income students having to access higher percentages of their household income to bridge that gap.

Students also identified leaving home as a barrier and that leaving is another stress- and anxiety-inducing variable in their decision. Rural students who desire a bachelor's degree are essentially required to leave home to obtain that credential as, aside from online options, there are few colleges and universities located in rural areas. This also requires a student to incur additional housing, food, and transportation expenses because they do not have the option to stay home and commute to classes each day. Most students attend an institution that is [fewer than 50 miles](#) from their home. In the Itasca County area, there are few options that meet those criteria.

**If you physically go to college, I think the pressure would be 10 times worse. When I think about my mental health and anxiety, I feel like I can't go far.**





# RECOMMENDATIONS

Data from these conversations suggest the following:

## **Blandin Foundation Scholarship Program**

- » Increase research into, and support of, career exploration and development programs that can help young people understand themselves, their interests and potential career opportunities that align with their interests.
- » Continue to consider expenses beyond tuition when calculating student need to reduce barriers to degree completion.
- » Consider increasing award sizes to help bridge the gap between the net cost of attendance and what families can afford to pay for college, encouraging more students to consider higher education.
- » Increase programmatic engagement with students to help them understand college application processes – increasing FAFSA assistance and offering workshops or other learning opportunities that aid students' development of understanding financial aid, applying for college and planning for their overall college experience.

## **Family and Other Supportive Adults**

- » Acknowledge the financial and non-financial challenges for rural student inherent with postsecondary education, but communicate with students in a way that helps them recognize that school after high school is not an all-or-nothing decision.
- » Normalize that the educational pathway is often a non-linear path to reduce the stress and anxiety that students face when making decisions about next steps. Examples of this include sharing stories of varieties of educational journeys, reassuring students that it is ok if they change plans, etc.

## **Schools**

\*Blandin Foundation recognizes and acknowledges the budget constraints of schools and the effects of those constraints on the following recommendations.

- » Strengthen and expand early career exploration and development opportunities. When students are in middle school, they are naturally exploring who they are and what interests they have, making it an opportune time in their development to help them explore future options.
- » Provide widely accessible opportunities for post-secondary exploration that encourages students to envision themselves participating in education beyond high school and the variety of routes through the experience.
- » Increase learning opportunities focused on understanding financial aid and how that translates into the net cost of attendance for college.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## State Governmental Bodies

- » Increase funding for school counselors to reduce the student to counselor ratio to under 250:1 in alignment with the recommendations of the American School Counselors Association. This will provide capacity for counselors to spend more time on career exploration and development programs.
- » Increase financial support for students who desire to pursue postsecondary education, focusing on those who face additional barriers to attendance due to geographic location and/or socioeconomic status.
  - ◊ Maximize aid at the student level, focusing on the full cost of attendance, not on tuition and fees only. For example, adapting the North Star Promise to a first-dollar tuition program allowing students to apply Pell, State and other funding to non-tuition expenses.
- » Increase support to the community college system to reduce barriers for rural students. [Reducing the revenue gap](#) between two-year and four-year institutions can strengthen the access points for rural and low-income students.





## WORKS CITED

- American School Counselor Association*. (2022-23). Retrieved from School Counselor Roles and Ratios: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/a988972b-1faa-4b5f-8b9e-a73b5ac44476/ratios-22-23-alpha.pdf>
- Godbey, S., & Gordon, H. R. (2019). Career Exploration at the Middle School Level: Barriers and Opportunities. *Middle Grades Review*, 5(2). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230750.pdf>
- Institute for College Access & Success. (2023, October). *Geography of Opportunity Series*. Retrieved from How Far do Students Travel for College?: [https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Hillman-Geography-of-Opportunity-Brief-2\\_2023.pdf](https://ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Hillman-Geography-of-Opportunity-Brief-2_2023.pdf)
- MN Office of Higher Education*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Net Price: [https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/sPages/Net\\_Price.cfm](https://www.ohe.state.mn.us/sPages/Net_Price.cfm)
- U.S. Department of Education NCES. (2017). *National Center for Education Statistics*. Retrieved from Beginning College Students Who Change Their Majors Within 3 Years of Enrollment: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434/index.asp>
- Van Oot, T., & Contreras, R. (2024, June 11). Minnesota's school counselor shortage is one of the worst in the nation. *Axios Twin Cities. Minnesota*.
- Yuen, V. (2020). *The \$78 Billion Community College Funding Shortfall*. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/78-billion-community-college-funding-shortfall/>