



ESTOY: Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth

Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources

LBJ School of Public Affairs

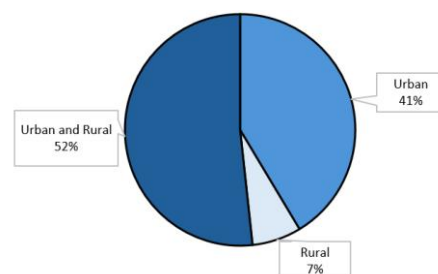
The University of Texas at Austin

Communities across the United States are challenged to provide equitable access to education/training and workforce development opportunities for youth and young adults ages 16 to 24.

This brief paper presents findings of a survey distributed to program staff and advocates currently engaged with opportunity youth. The objective of the survey was to gain an understanding of what program elements are most important in supporting opportunity youth in the attainment of their goals. The survey addresses three areas of concern: relationship and connection, education and training, and support services.

The survey findings represent the responses of 65 professionals and advocates working on behalf of Texas communities to include and support opportunity youth.

Organization Leaders	55%
Frontline Staff	30%
Advocates/Youth Voice	15%



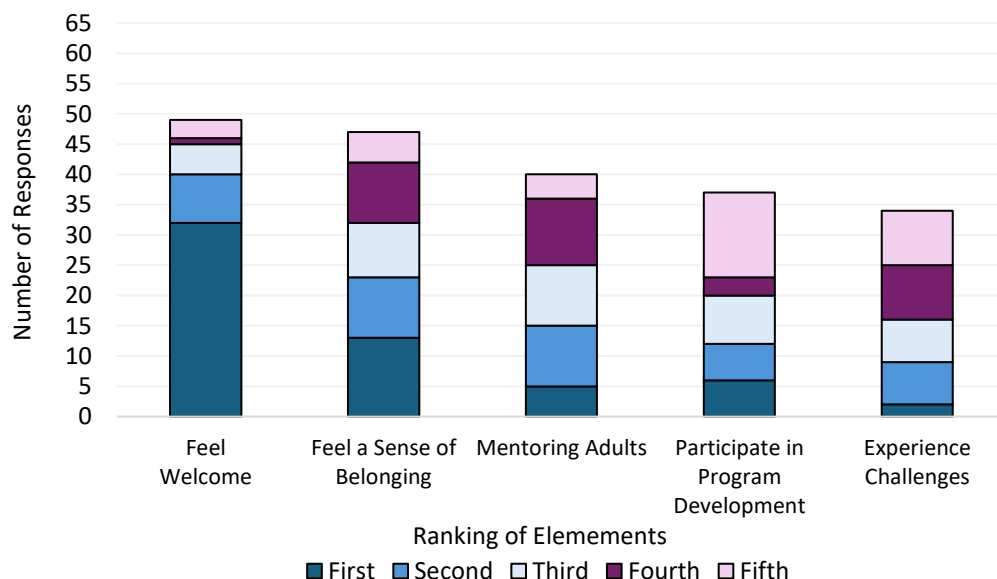
Relationship and Connections

"... a sense of belonging isn't a by-product of success but a condition for it—in school, work, home, ... virtually every domain in which humans deal with other humans."

(Cohen, 2022, p. x)

Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents identified the following two program elements as the top two most important elements that support youth and young adults in achieving their goals:

1. "Participants feel welcome when they first enter the program," and
2. "Participants feel a sense of belonging at the organization."



"Many disconnected youth and young adults view nonprofit programs of part of a system that has failed them. They don't want to feel like a number being recruited into a program: they want connection and relationships."

(Arratia, 2026)

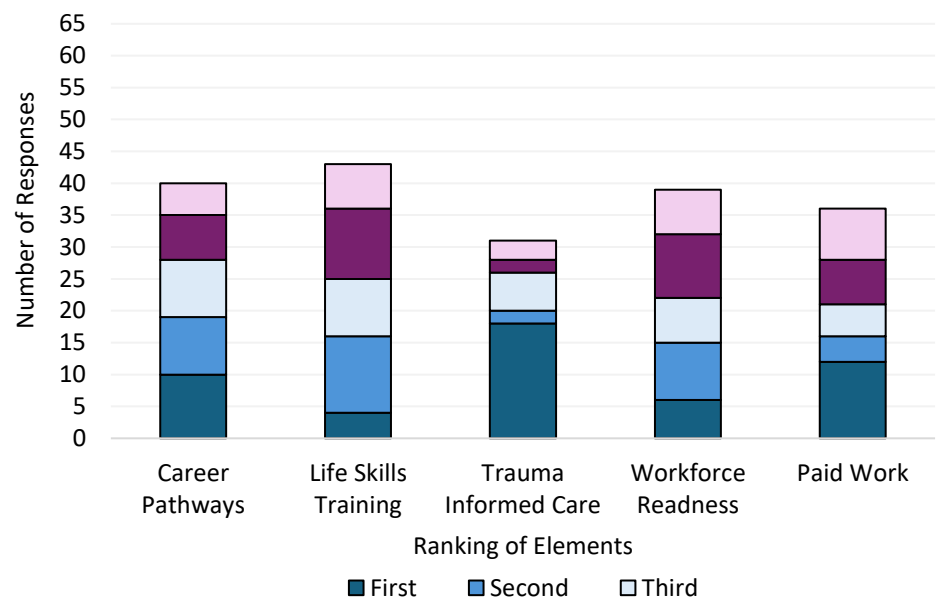
Education and Training

Ages 16 to 24 represent a period of development that has the potential for individuals to gain education and/or training that would “...provide the foundation for their occupational trajectories during the rest of their adulthood”

(Mendelson et al., 2018, p. 54S)

Among the education and training program elements included in the survey “Career Pathways: Provide support for participants to advance their education and training along a career pathway” received the highest combined ranking from respondents. Career pathways connect education and training programs to support advancement within a career, leading to advanced skills, recognized credentials, and better jobs with higher pay (Schwarz, et al., 2018).

It’s importance is understanding the significance of education/training and work in framing an individual’s social identity, sense of self and self-worth, and fostering their sense of connection within the broader community (Tomlinson, 2013).



“Preparing someone for employment and helping them get a job is a good thing no matter what, but it’s also important to support long term aspirations to ensure continued growth and motivation.”

(Ryland, 2026)

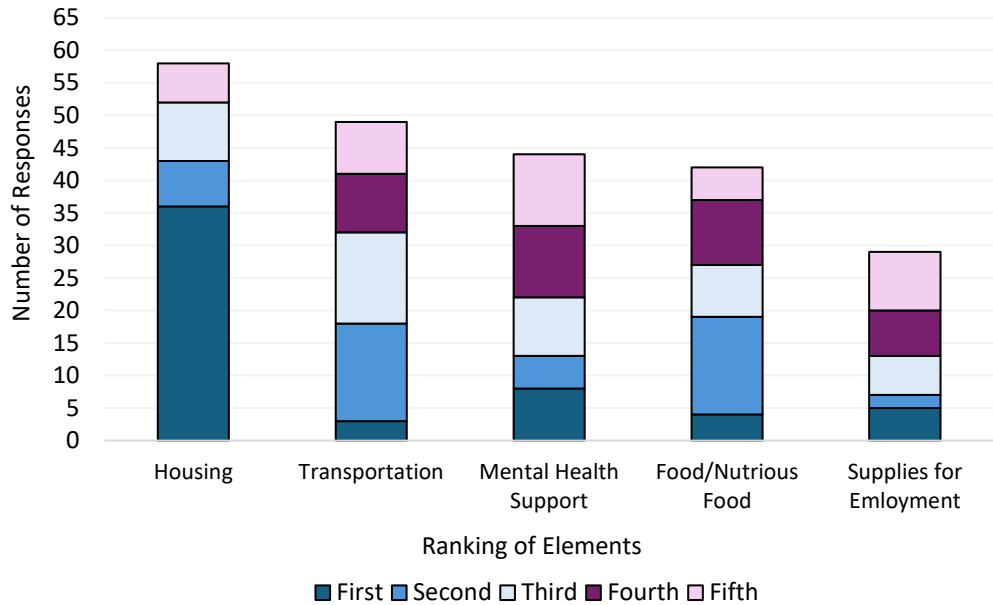
Of the respondents including “Trauma Informed and Healing Centered Care” in their top five most important program elements regarding education and training programming, 30% ranked Trauma Informed Care as the most important program element. These responses reinforce the importance of creating a healing community of relationships where people feel they belong and have some agency while they work to achieve their academic and career goals.

Social Supports

Research evaluating employment outcomes for young people completing workforce programs supports the finding that employment success for some young people who are entering education/training programs and/or the workforce, depends on integrating education, work-based experience, and support services (Harris, 2012). Programs commonly rely on local partners and other community-based organizations to provide access to services they are unable to provide.

The need for housing support was ranked first in importance to program participants in meeting their goals and was identified by 85% of survey respondents as one of the top supports needed. Ball et al. (2025) reported that in 2024, 33% Texas youth who age out of foster care experience homelessness at age 21.

The need for transportation assistance ranked second, followed by Mental Health Support. Access to food ranked fourth.



“Many youth entering housing services and shelters haven’t consistently had good home cooked hot food. Home cooked hot food for breakfast feels nourishing and nurturing. It brings a sense of being loved and cared for and sets people up to start their day from a good place”
Toussaint, 2026

In 2023, the Lone Star Justice Alliance (LSJA) collaborated with justice-involved opportunity youth peer researchers to gain insight into the realities of unmet need for the Dallas community. Based on over 108 survey responses and discussions with opportunity youth, the top three basic needs identified were a safe place to sleep, regular access to food and a permanent address (Lopez, et al., 2025).

Sources

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