



## ESTOY: Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth

Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources

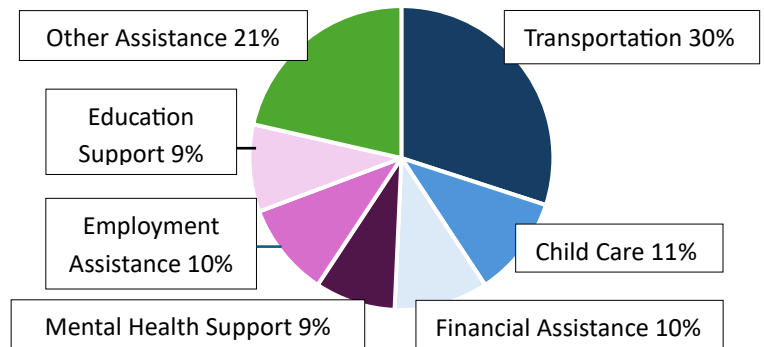
LBJ School of Public Affairs

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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 completed by 159 Texas youth and young adults receiving services from six different education and training programs providing services to opportunity youth. The objective of the survey was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of opportunity youth whose needs were not met by traditional education systems.

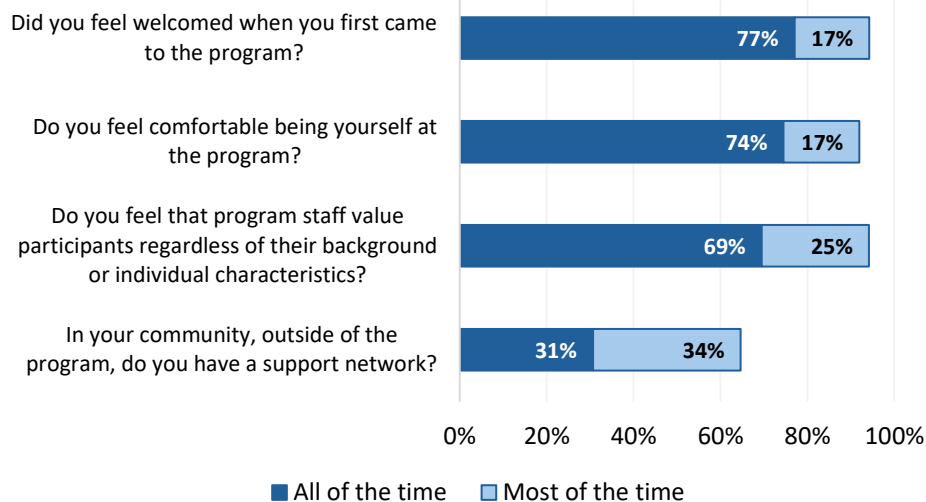
Program support services reported to be most helpful in supporting program participants to achieve their goals.



Other Assistance: Food, clothing, diapers, help with the justice system and health care.

### Relationship and Connections

Over 90% of respondents reported they felt welcomed and accepted at the program and were comfortable being themselves all or most of the time, while only 65% reported experiencing support from their own communities. When asked if they have someone in their life they can talk to if they have troubles, 89% identified program staff while 68% identified having someone outside of the program.



“Youth and young adults are searching for healing and for someone to listen to them. Programs creating safe, positive, nurturing, and loving space where vulnerable youth and young adults are accepted and not judged, create a space where individuals can trust and flourish.”

Toussaint, 2026

## Pursuing a Goal

“Goals give meaning and direction to life and are linked to well-being, health, and success across the lifespan.”

Bowers et al., 2025 p. 321

Lewis and Gluskin (2018) report that by the age of thirty, individuals who have been working or were enrolled in school as youth and young adults earn \$31,000 more per year and are 42% more likely to be employed than those who had been disconnected from education and employment as young people.

The survey questions explored here asked program participants about their goals, what barriers they may experience while striving to achieve their goals, what they have learned that is most helpful to achieving their goals, and what are their worries when they think about pursuing the next step along their education and career path.

| What are you reaching for in your life?                                        | n=96       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Stability and Financial Stability<br>Motivated by children and family          | 48%<br>16% |
| Career aspirations                                                             | 46%        |
| Education goal: current program completion<br>and entering secondary education | 22%        |

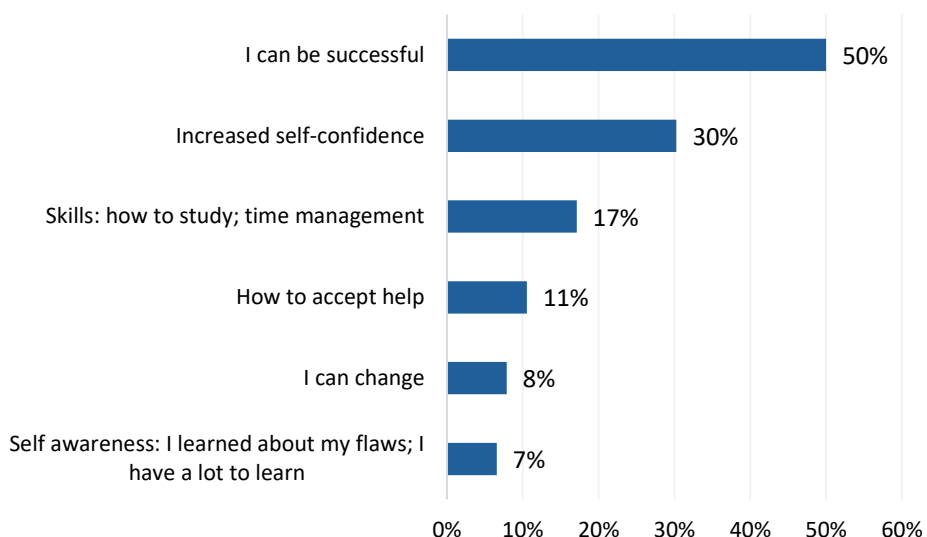
“I’m reaching for in life is success. I know I may fail here and there but I’m willing to give my all in life to reach my goals. I really want to graduate on time and other things I’m reaching for in life is becoming a ultrasound tech or a veterinarian. I also want to become the best version of myself.”

Program Participant Survey Respondent

| What could prevent you from achieving your goal?                                                                                                                                                                                             | n=90 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Self: “I feel that if I fail once I’ll give up and think that’s it that I’m not going to make it in life, I fear that if something goes wrong once I’ll stop trying for a while and then regret it.” “Lack of confidence and determination.” | 41%  |
| Nothing: “I don’t see nothing preventing me to reaching my goal because I can see myself doing this and also when I want it I’m not going to stop!”                                                                                          | 21%  |
| Lack of Support and Guidance: Child care; transportation; “not having the people around me support me;” “I need a good support system to help me push through and not give up.”                                                              | 16%  |
| Financial Concerns                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | 18%  |
| Other: Involvement with the criminal justice system; not being able to find a job; health and mental health issues; family hardships.                                                                                                        | 8%   |

Clearly, identifying a goal and then working diligently toward the achievement of that goal is a process involving the development of several skills: Skills ranging from self-confidence and self-efficacy to time management, study habits, and learning how to ask for and accept help.

#### What have you learned about yourself while attending the program? N=76



#### When you think about having a job or going on to additional schooling, what do you worry about?

n=72

|                                                                                                                    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Financial Concerns: Unexpected expenses                                                                            | 36% |
| Failing: Not being able to keep up grades; needing tutoring; staying focused; "If I'm gonna make a fool of myself" | 33% |
| Work/School Life Balance                                                                                           | 19% |
| Transportation                                                                                                     | 14% |
| Child Care: "My children if they are being watched over and taken care of;" "Someone else raising my daughter."    | 10% |
| Other: Physical and mental health concerns; support for a disability                                               | 6%  |

"I just worry about not doing my best. Even though I do my best, I guess I really worry it [my best] not being good enough."

Program Participant Survey  
Respondent

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. 545). In 2023, the estimate of opportunity youth across the state of Texas was 455,000, representing 12% of all youth and young adults ages 16-24 (Annie E. Cassey Foundation, 2026). Texas opportunity youth are a valuable resource that can fill critical in-demand jobs—both now and in the future. The opportunity facing Texas is in creating accessible and supportive pathways to education and training that will strengthen the connection between opportunity youth and the broader community, including connections to job opportunities that will enhance the standard of living for Texas opportunity youth.

## Sources

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The OY program participant survey tool was  
developed in collaboration with two groups  
of youth and young adults accessing  
workforce development services in the  
Austin, TX area. The survey tool is available  
at: [https://opportunityyouthtexas.org/wp-  
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Survey\\_5-20-2024.pdf](https://opportunityyouthtexas.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/FINAL-ESTOY-Participant-Survey_5-20-2024.pdf)

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