



# Understanding Underserved Youth To Better Serve Them

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# Expert Knowledge

BrandIQ facilitated two convenings with community-based organizations to gain knowledge on how CTE programs can attract and retain underserved youth, with the idea that a CTE education can help graduates earn a livable wage in Los Angeles

The convenings consisted of members and affiliates of two groups:

- **HOLA, Heart of Los Angeles:**
  - Since 1989 HOLA has been providing underserved youth with free, exceptional programs in academics, arts, and athletics within a nurturing environment, empowering them to develop their potential, pursue their education, and strengthen their communities.
- **SoCal CAN, Southern California College Access Network:**
  - Established in 2005, SoCal CAN is an alliance of over 70 organizations working to promote a college-going and completion culture in Southern California. SoCal CAN aims to cultivate a network of stakeholders, who will increase the number of low income students accessing and completing a post-secondary education.



# Who Are Underserved/ Opportunity Youth?



There was a general consensus that undeserved/opportunity youth are first generation immigrants, inner city youth, or both.

## The lives of underserved youth were characterized by:

- Crowded homes, mental health concerns, lack of confidence, survival mode, lack of emotional stability, multiple traumas
- Don't have an understanding of what they can accomplish and what opportunities they can utilize
- Exposure to support systems is limited or complicated
- Resources are sparse and lack quality (watered down versions of art and PE programs); additionally, there's an inaccurate assumption that resources are available to them
- Mental health services are not encouraged or adequately offered
- Lack of adult mentors and role models
- Language barriers for those who speak languages other than those spoken in large US cities: Cambodian, Vietnamese, and other ethnic communities need assistance as well
- Unable to navigate bureaucratic system, such as filing paperwork for student aid

# Underserved Youth After High School

Underserved youth typically **take one of two paths** after the completion of high school:

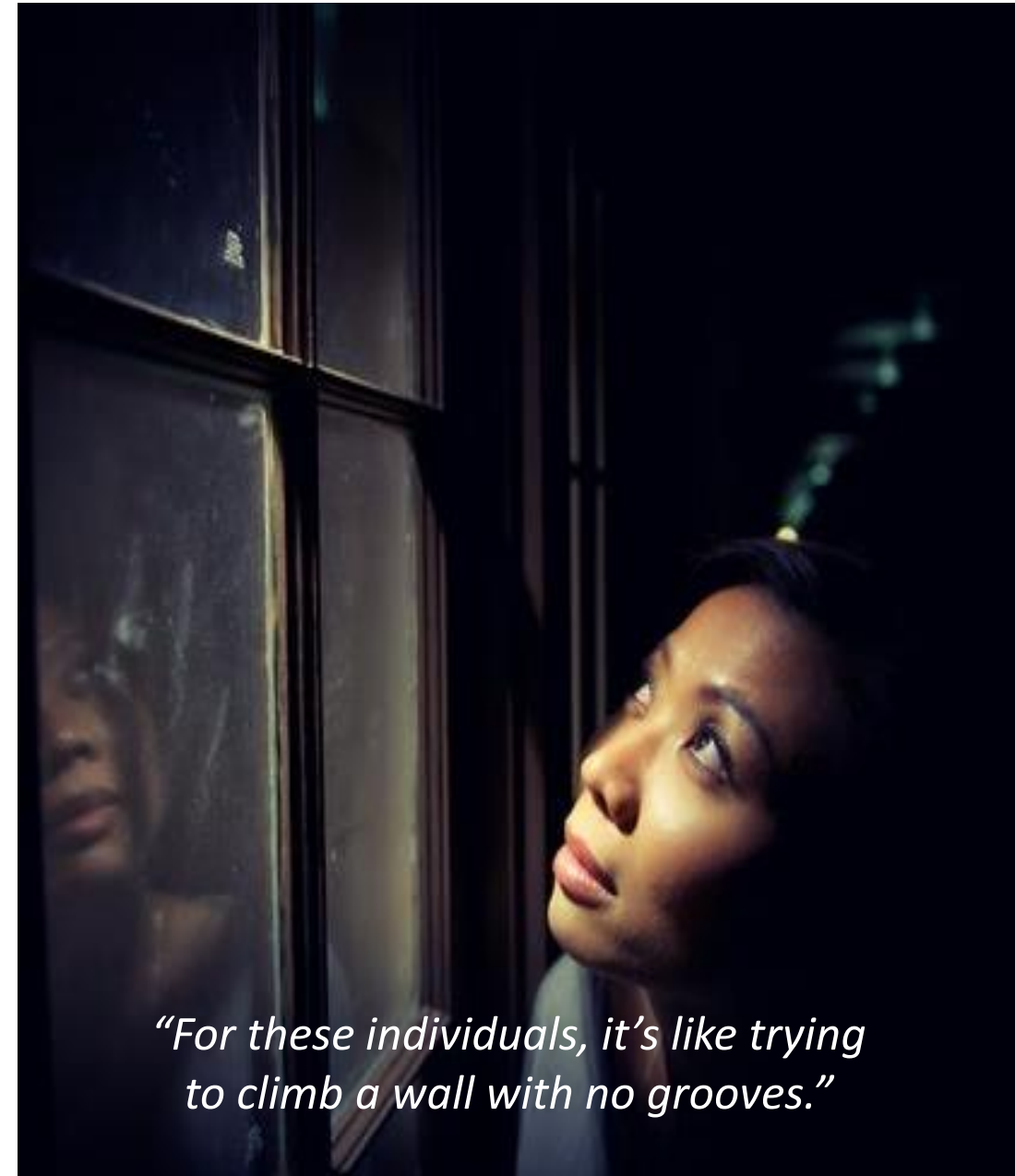
- Community college
- Enter/stay in the workforce to support family

In general, there are **two main groups of underserved youth**. The first group are **those that feel lost following high school**. They are characterized by:

- Lack of knowledge about careers or opportunities outside of traditional four-year colleges/universities
- Feelings of disdain and nervousness, as well as feeling limited and overwhelmed
- Paralysis, often due to fear of making the wrong choice and 'failing'

The second group are **those that are confident after the completion of high school**. There are several characteristics that distinguish them:

- Self-sufficiency
- Validation from others that they should be leaders
- Knowing how to use resources to get their questions answered and knowing how to ask questions



*“For these individuals, it’s like trying to climb a wall with no grooves.”*



# Many Underserved Youth Feel Confused and Uncertain after High School

- They need to work to support their family
- By the time they finish school, they are fatigued and don't want to continue their education
- They struggle envisioning their future and tend to operate in survival mode
- Insecure in finances and self-worth, they have difficulty processing where to go next
- They don't feel like they have the skills to meet market demands, entry level positions, or feel confident enough to make a commitment to a career
- They have unrealistic goals, not understanding the steps needed to get there
- They lack mentors and/or familial support

# Goals Coming Out of High School

Upon completion of high school, underserved youth tend to have multiple goals across various topical areas. These goals are often based on images of how others perceive them. **Specifically, these youth often latch onto professions that others perceive as being a good fit for them.**

At this time, they may lack the knowledge of what kind of work and resources are required to accomplish certain goals. As they begin to gain more knowledge, they then hone in on particular paths.

**They often feel that they do not have room to make mistakes.**

Many opportunity youth bear a heavy burden to not only fulfill their dreams, but also, to not disappoint their families. Education is often the path out of poverty, so failure at education is not an option.

**Confidence building is crucial at this stage.**

Mentors are needed at this stage to help these individuals make decisions regarding their goals. **Challenges arise because mentors and advisors have high caseloads, making it difficult to provide each student with personalized attention.**



“They don’t know what they don’t know.”



# An Uncertain Future

DreamBig

Hopeless  
Retail YouTubeStar  
Military  
Fastfood  
Tech  
4YearSchool  
CareerSuccessful

- Underserved youth have trouble identifying what resonates with them, what they want, and how to get there.
- Once there, now what?
  - They don't know who they are, who they can be, or how to think down the road and conceptualize next steps
  - Going to a 4-year university is an idealized aspiration, but not knowing what to do once they arrive doesn't equate to retention or financial success



# The Value of Education

**Youth in underserved neighborhoods do value education.**

They have the same potential as other youth; however, they often don't have the same resources. Also, despite valuing education, many underserved youth have experienced diverse traumas, which can prevent them from taking charge of their futures.

Others are stuck in survival mode: **They often need money in the present to prioritize and meet their basic needs (e.g., food, shelter).**

It is difficult for underserved youth to focus on school and envision themselves as successful when their basic needs are not being met at home or at school.



# Barriers to CTE Enrollment

The convenings offered various reasons on why underserved youth do not take advantage of CTE programs

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- Structural bias and stigma
  - CTE is perceived as a second choice and an undesirable option.
  - Students don't understand the benefits of CTE.
- Lack of marketing and readily available information
  - Providers of CTE must bring the product to the customer. They need to ensure they are reaching the right population and targeting the right student.
- Timing of marketing
  - Underserved youth tend to need a bit more time to explore their options. CTE should market to HS students but also continue marketing to older individuals (23+).
- Stringent requirements and rigid program structures
- Bureaucracy and complication of programs

- Lack of mental health services
  - In addition to systemic obstacles, lack of access to mental health and minimal dialogue about self-care impede success and stifle motivation.
- Lack of access to mentors
  - They lack mentors who have come from similar backgrounds and gone through similar experiences.
- Length of programs
  - Many underserved youth have a survival mindset. The long-term nature of CTE programs tend to conflict with their short-term needs.
- Lack of incentives
- Lack of job security
  - CTE jobs may not exist in the near future.
- Lack of access
  - Many CTE programs are location-based which limits many from enrolling.
- Lack of resources
  - Many underserved youth have limited access to the internet, technology, and Wi-Fi at home. They may have smartphones, but many only use them for social media. They often do not have personal laptops and may lack typing skills. Although they may have access to laptops in public spaces (e.g., library), these places are often in impoverished communities, and they lack safety because of gang activity and other criminal behavior.

# Opportunity for CTE

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**Pursuing a 4-year university degree isn't the most realistic choice for everyone; however, it is usually promoted as the only path for success.** For many students there is an overwhelming pressure to define themselves by a success model that is not suitable for their goals, needs, learning styles, and financial situation.

CTE programs can help students head towards a financially stable future. **Better marketing of CTE programs can help break down narrow definitions of educational success and promote programs that can help underserved youth achieve financial stability.** Underserved youth must understand the opportunities that are available with a CTE degree.

**CTE has an opportunity to design a curriculum that is flexible and meets the dynamic needs of opportunity youth, to increase enrolment and prevent drop out.** CTE programs can offer students vital resources, such as access to technology, mentorship, mental health services, and financial aid.



# Attracting Opportunity Youth to CTE Programs

- Eliminate stigmas associated with CTE and CC pathways
- Incentivize CTE students and inform them of the benefits of a CTE education
- Approach CTE from a holistic angle by taking into consideration diverse backgrounds, personalities, goals, etc.
- Provide information to students in high schools, and educate advisors about the benefits of CTE
- Provide free food/snacks at meetings explaining CTE benefits
- Connect with student support services
- Collaborate with partners to create shared resources, while alleviating gaps in communication
- Conduct an ideation with non-profits, educators, and other key stakeholders to formulate new ideas and strategies
- Create levels of CTE certificates, so students can have the freedom to return at a later date
- Provide integrated curriculums, allowing CTE students to work towards AA or BA degrees while pursuing CTE degrees

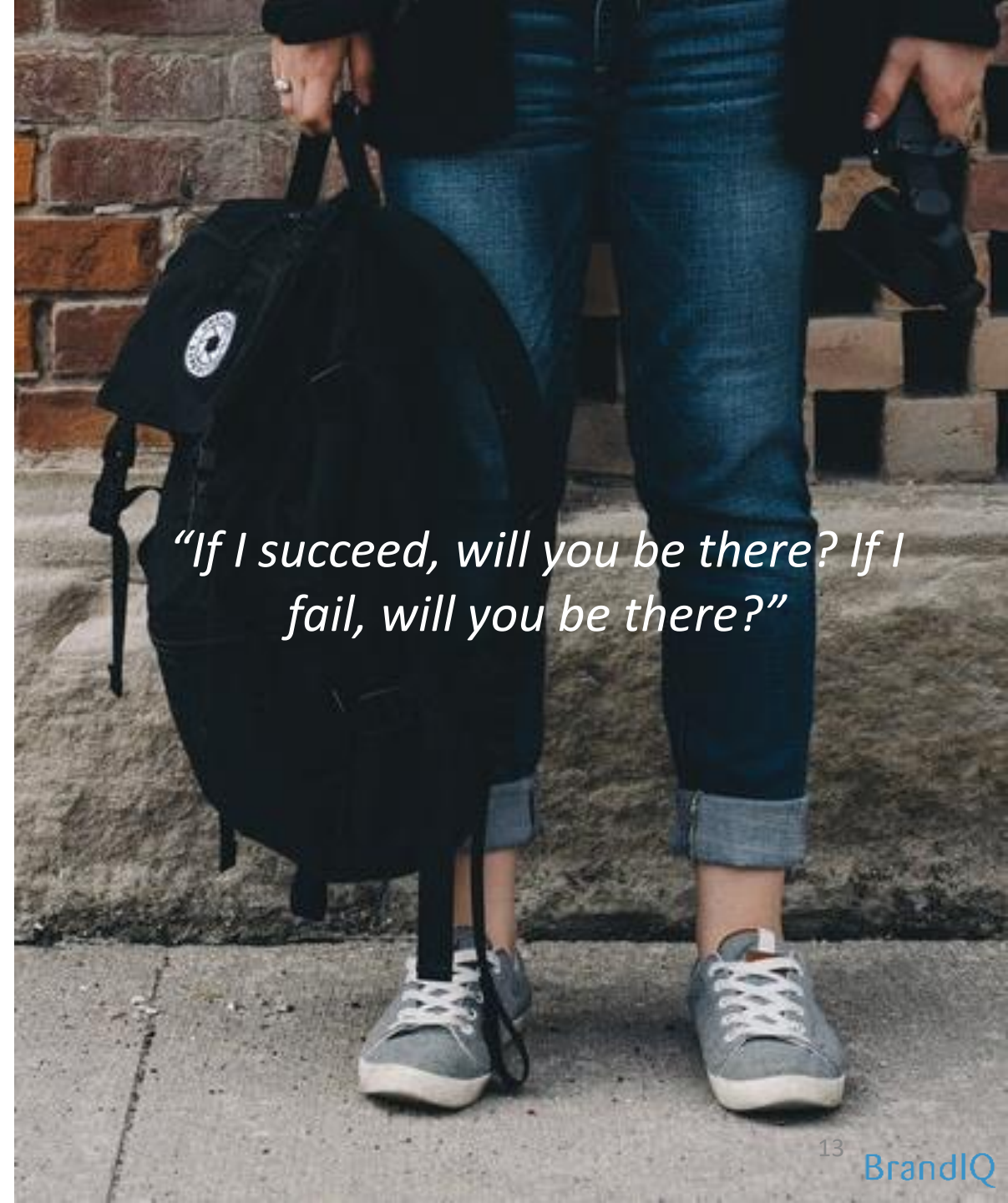
A top-down view of a desk with a smartphone, an open notebook, a yellow pencil, and a pair of glasses. The background is a light-colored surface.

## Barriers to Retention

- Lack of motivation because CTE is perceived as a second choice, last resort, and lesser option
- Overly stringent program requirements that lack flexibility and don't take into account unpredictable life events
- Programs are limited in scope and narrowly focused
- Students only see the work required but do not see the long-term benefits
- Students lose sight of long-term goals or have trouble creating them from the beginning
- Families and other priorities take precedence
- Lack of immediate gratification
- Lack of incentives (e.g., food, transportation, jobs)
- Messaging is confusing and navigating the CTE system is overwhelming

# Retaining Current CTE Students

- Create and sustain buy-in
  - Reenergize students as to the reasons they signed up
  - Continue to communicate with students about why they should stay enrolled
  - Explain to students that fixing the short-term can help the long-term
  - Remind them of their long-term goals and assist in forming a vision
- Connect with Employers
  - Connect with future employers and create programs that focus on gaining real-world work experience
- Discover What Employers are Looking For
  - Prepare students for the workforce by developing programs for emerging markets and lasting skills



# Best Practices



*“This is your life. You are in the driver’s seat. If you don’t put your foot on the pedal, you won’t go anywhere.”*

Convening guests recommended some best practices that have allowed their students to prosper:

- Provide students with access to resources, while also helping students develop self-efficacy
- Provide a community for students where they know someone is there and cares, even if they make mistakes
- Create a space for students that serves as a safe zone with unconditional support
- Inspire buy-in among students and staff
- Acknowledge agency in underserved/opportunity youth
- Help students get documents in on time
- Go above and beyond to support students
- Focus on each student’s personalized goals and needs

# Workforce Partnerships to Inspire



## Rio Hondo College:

### TESLA START Program

- RHC works directly with TESLA to prepare students for the demands in the workforce
- An intensive training program designed to help students develop the skills needed at TESLA
- Focuses on both theoretical and hands on learning
- Over 20 students annually graduate from this course and are hired at TESLA



## Cerritos College: The Ford Automotive Student Service Educational Training (ASSET)

- A two-year automotive program design to upgrade the technical competency and professionalism of the incoming dealership technician.
- The curriculum is designed by Ford and Cerritos College, and leads to an Associate Degree



## Cerritos College & Santa Monica College:

### Dermalogica

- Students are trained to meet Dermalogica industry needs and standards
- Students work with Dermalogica products and grow alongside the company's cutting-edge work in cosmology



# Recommendations



- Continue efforts to facilitate convenings between community-based organizations and education administrators
  - This creates a space for diverse ideas to come together under common goals
  - This eliminates silos by creating a space for networking to flourish between diverse entities
- Improved marketing to raise the status of CTE education
  - All youth need to be made aware of different paths one can take after high school, with clear ideas of costs of education and job market demand
  - Shift perceptions of CTE and CC education: CTE and CC education offer great benefits to all youth
- Holistic Care
  - An overwhelming number of students have layered traumas and intense pressures to succeed, so there should be mental health services and mentorships made readily available to the student.
- Provide support throughout the program
  - Many underserved students drop out of programs after being accepted, so there should be continued mentorship, financial assistance, and social services provided until completion.



Some of the participants at the convenings included:

Leslie Aaronson, LA Promise Fund, Director of Pathway Improvement

Tony Brown, HOLA, Chief Executive Officer

Edmundo Diaz, HOLA, College Retention Advisor

Olivia DeLao, HOLA, Fullfillment Fund, Post-Secondary Coordinator

Margaret Fernandez, Rio Hondo College, Grant Manager, Strong Workforce

Katherine Kouot, HOLA, College and Career Success Program Director

Gary Krauss, Ascending Light, President

Jose Lara-Lopez, HOLA, College and Career Success Program Manager

Anne Lobsinger, Ascending Light, Executive Director

Matthew Moor, LAEP, College Pathways Coordintor

Mitch Moore, Marketing and Outreach Manager, Blue LA

Kevin Pena, HOLA, College Access Coordinator

Cecilia G. Rocha, Rio Hondo College, Grant Manager, Student Equity

Erin Steinberger, SMC, Faculty

Sal Veas, SMC, Department Chair