



DeBruce
FOUNDATION

How to Talk with Youth About Careers in the Age of AI

2026 study commissioned by
The DeBruce Foundation



How to Talk with Youth About Careers in the Age of AI

Join youth where they are. Build career literacy & network strength:

- Express interest in **self-discovery**.
- **Listen** to concerns youth may have about AI's possible impacts on career opportunities.
- Show **confidence and hope** in them for their future careers.
- Value **relationships**, both online and in person.
- Share tips and **resources** supporting career exploration.
- Provide opportunities for **new experiences and network connections**.

Connect with their **challenges**, **changes**, and **choices**:



CHALLENGES



CHANGES



CHOICES

Notice common challenges for many youth: knowing how to achieve their career goals; maintaining hope and resilience in an environment where messages that they are hearing about AI could cause them to disengage.

Engage the disengaged. One in four youth aren't thinking about their career futures. Meet them with authentic interest.

Bridge the knowledge gap. Most youth are confident they'll reach their goals but aren't sure how. Help make the path concrete.

Acknowledge AI anxiety. Nervousness about AI's impact on careers is real and widespread. Recognize concerns that some past paths may narrow or close.

Acknowledge that the future is uncertain, but balance negative narratives.

Dominant messages about AI could cause some youth to lose hope and disengage. Provide real, credible information about opportunities.

Build career literacy. Stronger career knowledge and networks help youth build resilience to AI pessimism. Skill-building provides practical and psychological protection.

Reach young women. Young women are less likely to see AI bringing opportunities and more likely to be disengaged from preparing for its impacts.

Recognize dangers of complacency. Confidence about the future can be an asset, but some youth may need help understanding coming changes and how to prepare.

Help broaden their views of career paths. Build sense of empowerment by sharing time and technologies to aide exploration of career options and preparation that fit their strengths and interest

Honor self-discovery. Young people want to understand their own strengths, which is a key starting point for them to make progress toward their career futures.

Help build capability to use AI as a tool for career exploration. Interest in AI tools to find jobs and explore careers is high, but most youth do not feel confident they can use AI effectively for these purposes.

Prioritize connection. Network strength is among the strongest predictors of a hopeful AI outlook. Help youth build relationships with people in careers of interest.

KEY FINDINGS

To learn more about How to Talk with Youth About Careers in the Age of AI, visit www.DeBruce.org



1

Most youth are engaged in building skills and thinking about careers — but a substantial minority are not.

79% of youth agree or strongly agree that they are actively working to improve their work-related skills. Most either know their desired career or spend time thinking about it. But 25% of youth are not thinking about their career futures.

2

Most youth are confident about reaching their career goals, but they have real knowledge gaps about how to get there.

85% of youth are at least somewhat confident they will ultimately achieve their career goals. But 44% say they have little or no idea what they need to be doing to prepare for a career and only 11% say they have a "very clear" idea.

3

AI is causing significant concern among youth about their career futures.

Three times as many youth agree that AI is making them more nervous about future career prospects than disagree. And 60% expect AI to shrink or close career opportunities of interest, while only 36% expect it to open new ones.

4

Concern about AI's impact on careers is broadly shared.

Regardless of background or current status in or out of school, youth are consistently more likely to expect AI to close career opportunities than to open them. Young women are somewhat more likely than young men to be disengaged or pessimistic.

5

Youth vary in how much they've heard about AI's likely impacts — and the more they've heard, the more pessimistic they tend to be.

94% of youth have heard at least something about how AI might affect jobs and careers. Those who have heard a lot are 2.5 times as likely to strongly agree that AI makes them nervous about career prospects than those who have heard less.

6

Strong career literacy and network skills help buffer the pessimism resulting from messages about AI's threats to jobs and careers.

Among youth who have heard a lot about AI's possible impacts, those with above-average career literacy and network strength are significantly less likely to strongly agree that AI makes them nervous (33% vs. 45%), and more likely to expect AI to open opportunities.

7

Most youth are interested in AI-enabled tools for career exploration, but many will need help using them effectively.

Over 63% of youth say they already use AI tools for job searching or career exploration. And 76% express interest in AI tools for at least one specific career exploration task. But only 32% say they both use AI tools and feel confident they can use them well.

8

Interest in using AI tools for career exploration is strongly tied to whether youth expect AI to open new opportunities.

Whether youth expect AI to open new career opportunities is the key driver of interest in AI tools for career exploration. 93% of youth who expect AI to open opportunities are interested in AI career tools, compared to only 66% of those who do not.

How to Talk with Youth About Careers in the Age of AI

Commissioned By: The DeBruce Foundation

Written By: Andrew Clarkwest, Ph.D.

In 2026, more than 20 million young people (ages 16–24) are navigating a world of work undergoing rapid and uncertain transformation. Artificial intelligence is reshaping industries, displacing some occupations, and creating others at a pace that even labor market experts find difficult to forecast. For young people standing at the threshold of their careers, this uncertainty is something they are already grappling with, and it is shaping how they think about what comes next.

As part of its work to expand pathways to economic growth and opportunity and help individuals unlock their potential, The [DeBruce Foundation](#) has sponsored comprehensive research on young people and their preparation for careers since 2017. This research illuminates how young people come to decide what career they want to pursue, their perceived opportunities and obstacles, and what resources they believe are available to them. It also reveals how parents, educators, counselors, and others who work with young people should approach those conversations.

This 2026 report draws on The DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey, administered by Alchemer in December 2025 and January 2026. The survey reached 702 young people ages 16–24 across the United States, representative of youth nationwide on race, sex, and rural/metropolitan location. This is the fourth wave of this ongoing research, following studies in 2019, 2021, and 2023.

Key Findings

1. Most youth are engaged in building skills and thinking about careers — but a substantial minority are not.

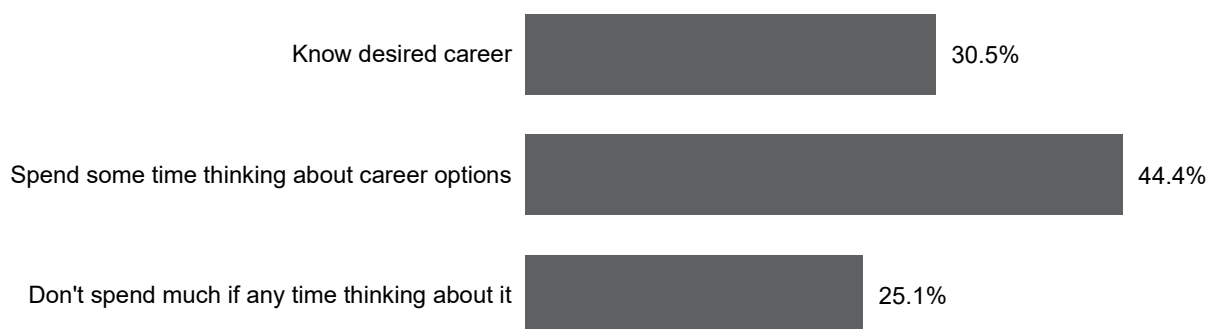
Young people in our survey demonstrate a meaningful level of active engagement in thinking about careers and building the skills they will need. But the picture is uneven. A significant share of youth remain on the sidelines of career thinking, and understanding why is important for anyone trying to help them.

Career Engagement: Most Are Still Deciding; but Some are Disengaged

Just under one in three young people say they already know the career they want to pursue. Given the age of our respondents, it is understandable that most don't yet know. A larger group (44%) don't know their desired career but do spend time thinking about their options. Together, these two groups form a 75% majority who are at least engaged with the question of their career future.

But one in four youth report they spend little or no time thinking about what career they might want. Among those who are undecided about a career, more than one in three falls into this disengaged category. This represents a large number of youth whose career potential is at risk of not being realized.

Figure 1. Career engagement among youth

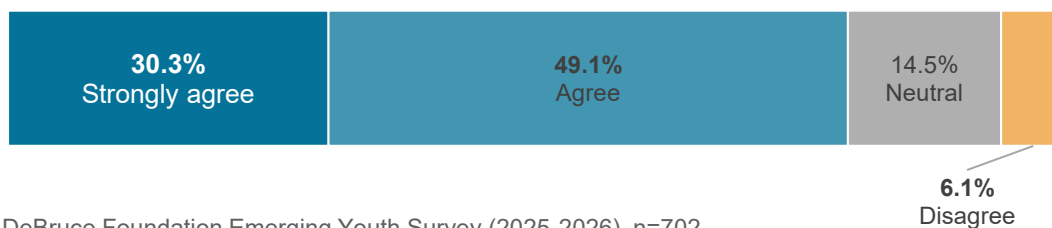


DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Skill-Building: Most Are Actively Working on It

When asked to respond to the statement "I am actively working on improving my work-related skills," a large majority—nearly 80%—express agreement. About half say they “agree,” while another three in ten strongly agree. But about one in five youth either remain neutral or disagree, indicating that they are not consistently or deliberately engaged in developing skills that will prepare them for the future.

Figure 2. Agreement with the statement, "I am actively working on improving my work-related skills."



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Understanding Disengagement

These findings raise an important question: why are some youth disengaged? Career preparation requires aspiration, planning, and action, and disengagement from any of these can stem from different sources. Some young people may find the uncertainty of career provokes anxiety. The high stakes and sheer number of options may make it easier to avoid than engage. Others may lack the practical information or connections they need to see ways that specific preparation would be worthwhile. Others may simply assume things will work out in the end. This optimism has benefits, but if it comes without concrete action, it could risk leaving young people underprepared when opportunities arise.

Whatever the source, outreach and guidance must meet youth where they are. This includes engaging those who are not yet asking for help. For these young people, a conversation that begins with "What are you interested in?"—rather than the traditional "What do you want to be when you grow up?"—is likely to be more productive than one that opens with a list of things they should already be doing.

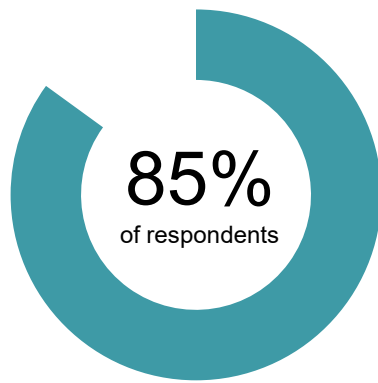
"A conversation that begins with 'What are you interested in?' is likely to be more productive than one that opens with a list of things a young person should already be doing."

2. Most youth are confident about reaching their career goals, but they have real knowledge gaps about how to get there.

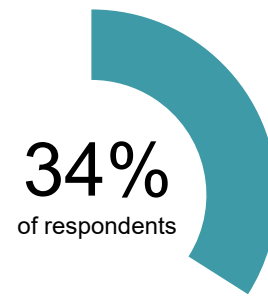
Young people in this survey, like those in the three prior waves of DeBruce research, are broadly optimistic about their ability to reach their career goals. That confidence is real and should be respected. But it coexists with a significant and consequential knowledge gap where many young people lack a clear sense of what they need to do to achieve those goals.

Most Youth Have Confidence in Achieving Career Success

When asked how sure they are that they will ultimately achieve their career goals and find an occupation that suits them, 85% of youth express at least some confidence, with 34% saying they are very confident and 51% somewhat confident. Only about 15% say they are not very confident or not confident at all. This is consistent with, though slightly below, the 90% figure recorded in 2023.

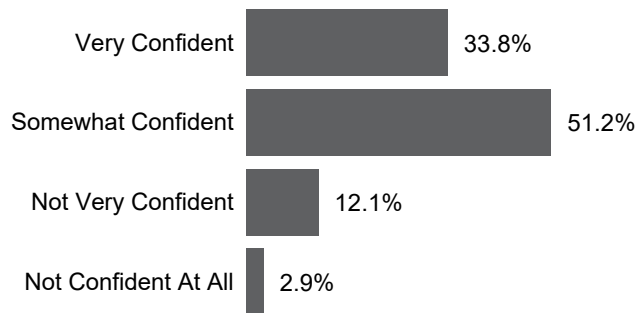


are at least **somewhat confident** they will ultimately achieve their goals.



are at least **very confident** they will ultimately achieve their goals.

Figure 3. Confidence in Achieving Career Goals

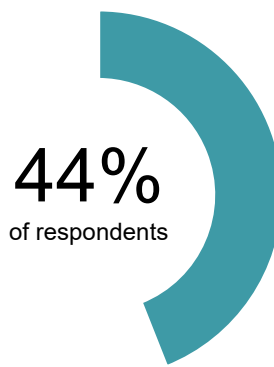


DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026),

Whether this confidence is fully warranted, it is helpful to appreciate the ways that it can be an asset. Confidence is a key starting point for young people. Without some confidence, they may not have a reason to engage in future-focused preparation. Approaches that lead with "you need to be more realistic" risk alienating the young people they are trying to help.

Confidence in Achieving the Goal Does not Equate to Knowing the Path

Beneath this layer of outcome confidence lies a more sobering picture. When asked how clear an idea they have of "the things I need to be doing to prepare for a career," only 11% say they have a very clear idea. An additional 45% say they have a "pretty good idea," but 44% say they have only a little bit of an idea or no idea at all.

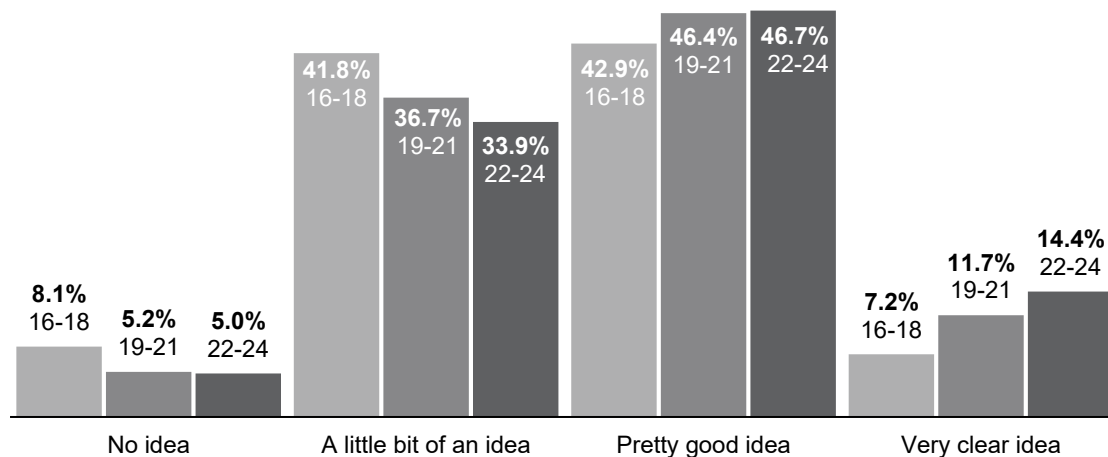


have **little or no idea** what they need to do to prepare for a career.

One might expect this knowledge gap to close as young people age. Our survey confirms that it does, but more slowly than one might hope. Among 16–18-year-olds, just 7% report a very clear idea of their preparation path. That grows to 12% among 19–21-year-olds, and to 14% among 22–24-year-olds. But that is still fewer than one in six, even among those who are closest to full labor market entry.

Figure 4. How clear is the path?

This chart represents clarity about career preparation steps by age group for ages 16 to 24.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

This finding highlights how youth of all ages need more concrete, accessible guidance on the specific steps that lead to desired career outcomes. While confidence in reaching goals is widespread among youth, clarity on how to get there is not.

3. AI is causing significant concern among youth about their career futures.

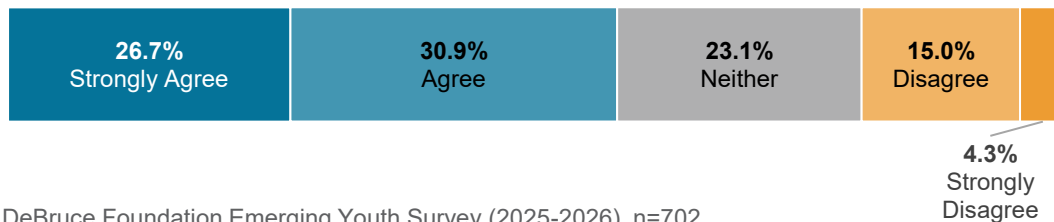
Artificial intelligence is influencing most young people's thinking about their career futures. And it is more likely to evoke concern than hope. Youth in our survey are far more likely to worry about what AI will do to their career options than to see it as a source of new opportunity.

Widespread Nervousness

When asked whether they agree that "AI makes me more nervous about my future career prospects," youth are roughly three times as likely to agree that AI makes them nervous as they are to disagree; 58% of youth agree or strongly agree, with more than one-in-four strongly agreeing. Fewer than one-in-five disagree or strongly disagree.

Figure 5. "AI makes me more nervous about my future career prospects."

The following distribution is about levels of agreement with the above prompt.

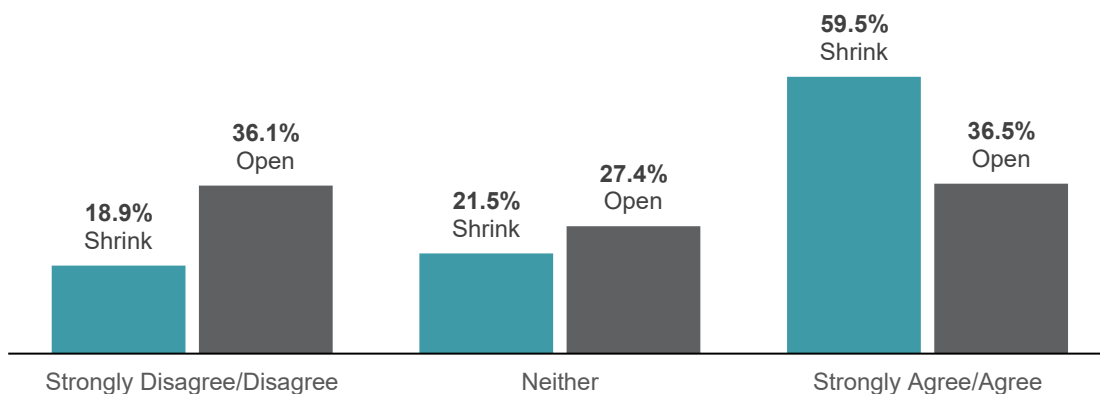


More Expect AI to Close Doors Than Open Them

When asked about the specific effects they expect AI to have on career opportunities of interest, youth are much more likely to expect AI to close career opportunities than to open new ones. While 60% of youth agree or strongly agree that AI will shrink or eliminate career fields they would like to have entered, only 37% agree or strongly agree that AI will open new career opportunities that fit their strengths and interests.

Figure 6. Expected AI impacts: **will AI shrink** or **will AI open** career opportunities?

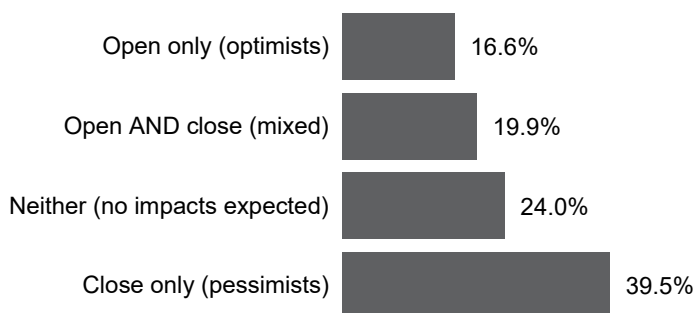
Bars in blue show perception that **AI will shrink career opportunities** and grey the opposite.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Of course, those expectations aren't mutually exclusive. Anticipating negative effects of AI doesn't mean that youth don't also anticipate positive effects—or vice-versa. To understand youths' outlooks with greater nuance, we categorized youth by whether they expect AI to open opportunities, close opportunities, both, or neither. The largest single group (40%) expects AI **only to close** career opportunities. About one-in-five expect AI to **both close and open** opportunities. A smaller group (17%) expects AI **only to open** opportunities. And nearly a quarter (24%) don't expect AI to affect their career options in either direction. As we note under Finding 5, this lack of perceived future changes carries its own risks.

Figure 7. What do youth expect AI to do to career opportunities of interest?



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

What Drives Youth's Nervousness?

Not all sources of AI concern are equally powerful. To understand what drives nervousness, we compared levels of AI anxiety among youth who differ in their expectations about whether AI will open vs. close career opportunities of interest. Youths' responses indicate that expectations that AI will close opportunities are the main driver.

Among youth who expect AI to **open** new opportunities, 60% agree that AI makes them nervous, compared to 53% of those who don't expect AI to open opportunities. That gap is noticeable, but modest.

Figure 8. AI nervousness, by whether youth expect AI to **open** new opportunities.

This prompt explores youth perceptions around new career opportunities from AI.

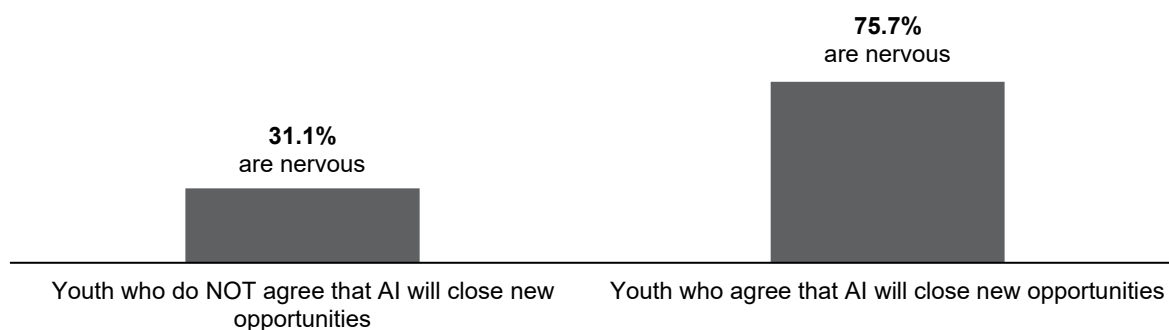


DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702. We classified youth as "nervous" if they responded that they "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "AI makes me more nervous about my career prospects."

The contrast involving expectations for whether AI will **close** opportunities is far more dramatic. Among youth who don't expect AI to close any opportunities of interest, only 31% agree that AI makes them nervous about their career future. But among those who do expect AI to close opportunities, 76% agree that AI makes them nervous.

Figure 9. AI nervousness, by whether youth expect AI to **close opportunities.**

This prompt explores youth perceptions around new career opportunities from AI.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702. We classified youth as "nervous" if they responded that they "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "AI makes me more nervous about my career prospects."

The difference in the percentage of youth who are nervous about AI's career impacts between those expecting and not expecting AI to close opportunities (45 percentage points) is more than five times larger than the comparable difference for opening expectations (8 percentage points). This is consistent with behavioral science showing that people are more emotionally affected by perceived losses than by potential gains.

The fact that a young person is likely to be nervous about their future if they believe AI will close doors in their field of interest, regardless of whether they also expect AI to open new doors, has practical implications. Helping youth understand the potential for new opportunity matters, but it will not fully offset the anxiety driven by perceived threats to existing career paths. It is important to build youth's resilience to navigate uncertainty and possible lost opportunities.

"If a young person believes AI will close doors in their field of interest, they are very likely to be anxious—regardless of whether they also expect AI to open new doors."

4. Concern about AI's impact on careers is broadly shared, though somewhat more acute among young women.

We've seen that youth have some widely varying perceptions of and feelings about AI's likely impact on their career futures. An open question is whether those views vary systematically by youths' background or current life situation. Survey responses indicate that across socioeconomic backgrounds and educational situations, youth are consistently more likely to expect AI to close career opportunities than to open them. That is largely true by gender as well, though we do find a bit more variation between young women and young men.

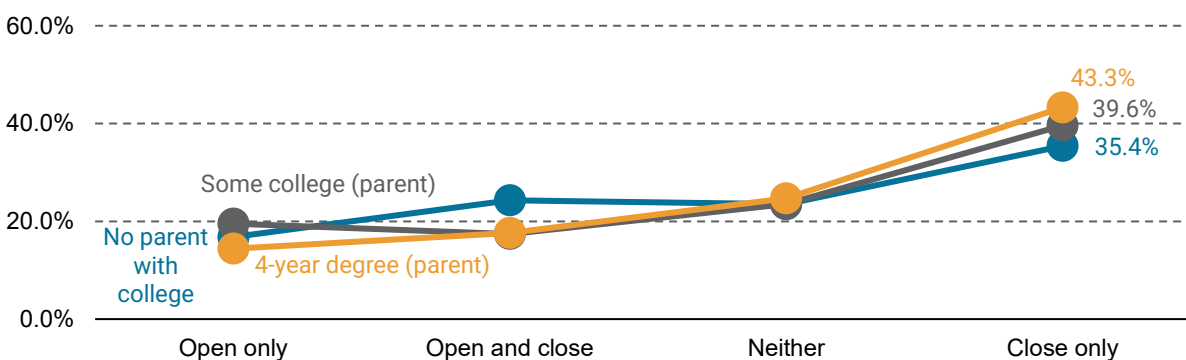
Consistent Views Across Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Examining AI outlook by parents' educational attainment—a common proxy for socioeconomic background—reveals remarkable consistency. Despite the fact that youths' views on economic opportunities would be expected to be influenced by what they see around them growing up, survey responses show that the percentage that expect AI to close career opportunities of interest is between 57% and 61% among youths irrespective of their parents' level of college attainment.

If anything, youth from households with lower levels of educational attainment are modestly more optimistic: 35% of those with no college-educated parent expect AI to only close (and not open) opportunities, compared to 43% of those with a college-educated parent.

Figure 10. Consistent views on AI across parental education stages.

Expected AI impacts on career options by parents' highest education level.

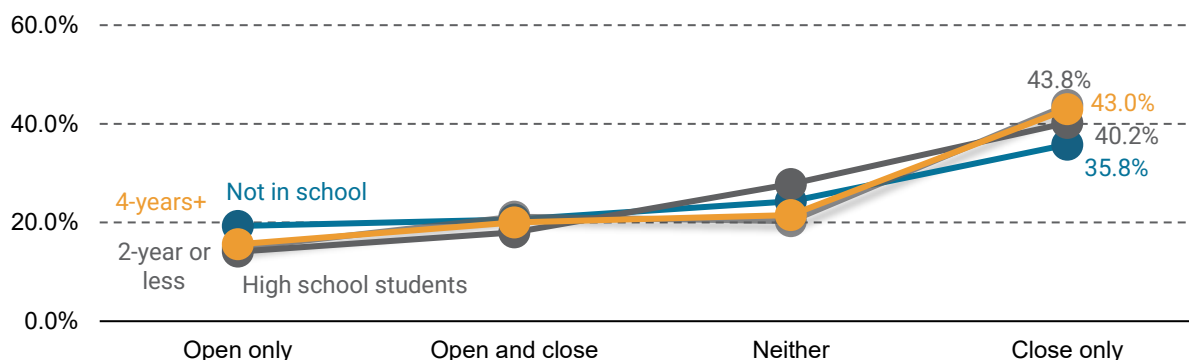


DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Consistent Views Across Educational Stages

We also examined AI outlook by educational stage. Across high school students, two- and four-year college students, and those not in school, the pattern holds: more youth expect AI to close opportunities than open them. The "close only" group is consistently at or above 40% among students at all levels. Youth not currently in school are modestly more optimistic — 36% expect AI to only close opportunities, and 19% expect it only to open them — perhaps reflecting greater direct labor market exposure. Even so, they remain substantially more likely to anticipate closing rather than opening.

Figure 11. Consistent views on AI across student enrollment levels.
Expected AI impacts on career options by student's highest level of enrollment.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

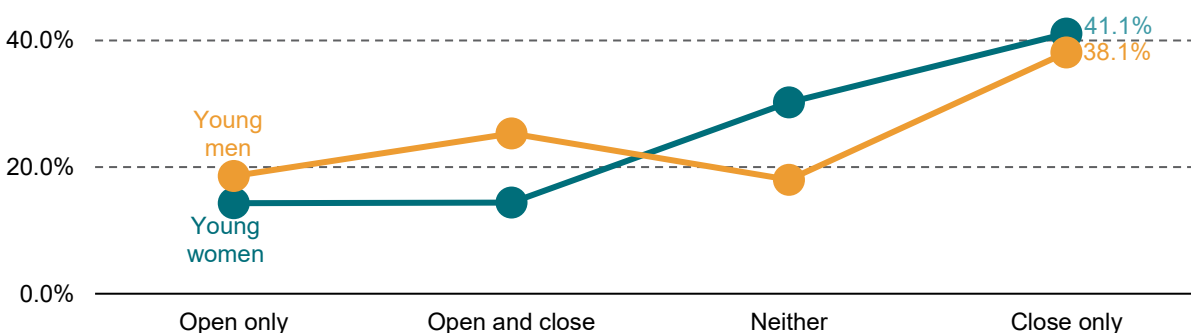
A Notable Gender Gap

The most meaningful demographic difference we observe is between young women and young men. Both are more likely to expect AI to close opportunities than to open them. But young women are more likely to fall into the "neither" category, not expecting AI to significantly affect their career options in either direction (30%, compared to 18% among young men). This might indicate less engagement or awareness of AI's influence on labor markets. Or it could reflect differences in occupations that young women expect to go into, and that those could be less heavily impacted by AI.

Young men are relatively more likely to see AI as likely to open opportunities of interest: 44% of young men expect AI to open some opportunities (either with or without also closing some), compared to 29% of young women.

Figure 12. Expected AI impacts on careers by gender.

The lines in **blue** show those who are **young women** and **yellow** those who are **young men**.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

For those working with young people, this gender gap warrants specific attention. If young women are more likely to be disengaged or less likely to see AI as opening possible opportunities, they may be less likely to take the kind of preparatory steps that build resilience.

Outreach that validates young women's concerns and highlights concrete pathways forward is an important priority.

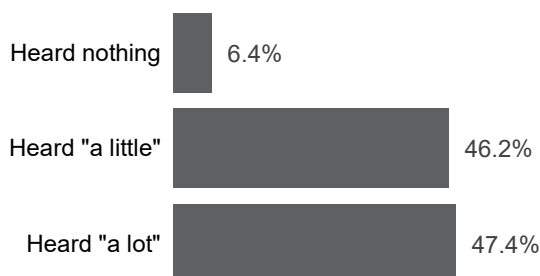
5. Youth vary in how much they've heard about AI's likely impacts... and the more they've heard, the more pessimistic they tend to be.

Proclamations about AI's effects on labor markets are everywhere. Some lean hopeful while others are cataclysmic. The degree to which those messages reach individual young people varies, but when they do, they appear to shift outlooks in a negative direction.

Nearly All Youth Have Heard Something About How AI Might Affect Jobs

Only 6% of youth say they have heard nothing about how AI might affect jobs and careers in the future. The remaining 94% have heard at least something—split roughly evenly between those who say they've heard "a little" and those who say they've heard "a lot". Some level of awareness of conversations about AI's potential labor market impacts is now nearly universal among youth. Variation is mostly how much they have heard.

Figure 13. How much have youth heard about AI's possible impacts on jobs and careers?



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

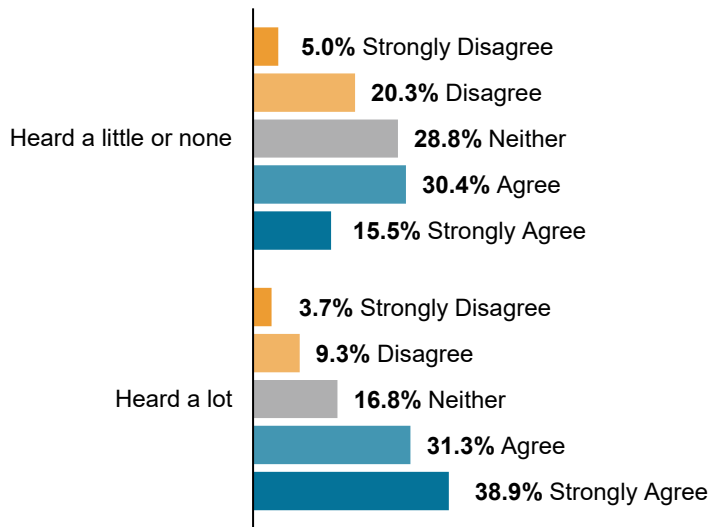
More Awareness, More Anxiety

Although youth from different backgrounds have broadly similar views on how AI might impact their career options, we observe large differences in those views depending on how much youth have heard about AI's possible impacts. Among youth who have heard only *a little or nothing* about AI's likely impacts, 46% agree or strongly agree that AI makes them nervous about their career prospects. Among those who have heard *a lot*, that figure rises to 70%.

Youth who have heard a lot are 2.5 times as likely as youth who have heard less to *strongly agree* that AI makes them nervous about their career future (39% vs. 16%). They are also only half as likely to disagree or strongly disagree (13% vs. 25%).

Figure 14. "AI makes me more nervous about my career prospects."

Below is the distribution of data-informed agreement levels with the above prompt.



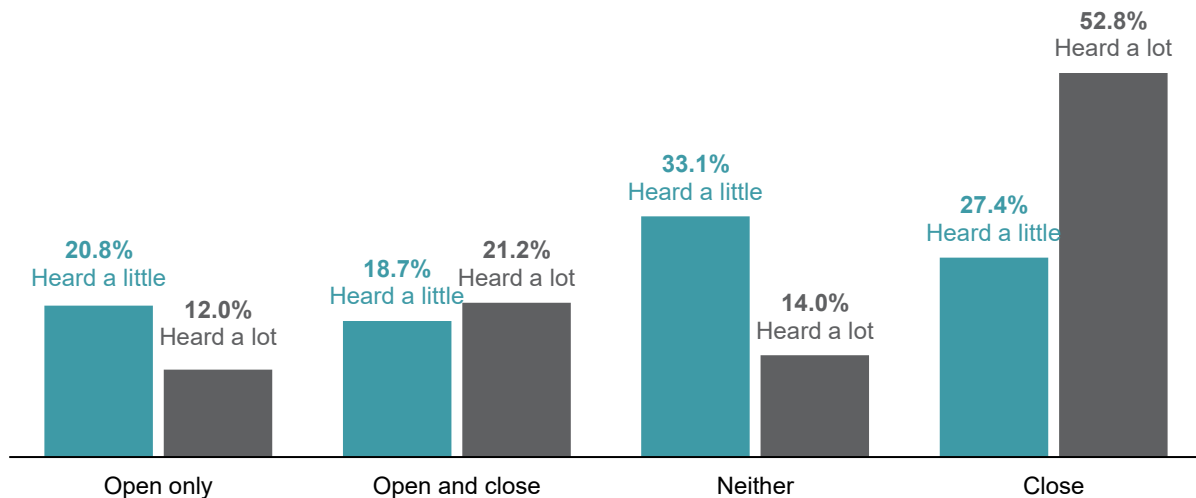
DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

More Awareness, More Pessimism About Opportunities

A similar pattern appears when looking at expectations for whether AI will open or close career opportunities of interest. Among youth who have heard a little or nothing about AI's impacts, 27% expect AI to *only close* opportunities. Among those who have heard a lot, that figure nearly doubles to 53%. Meanwhile, the share expecting AI to *only open* opportunities falls from 21% to 12%, and the share expecting no impacts at all drops even more precipitously, from 33% to just 14%.

Figure 15. Expected AI Impact on career opportunities, by AI information level.

The bars in **blue** show those who have **heard a little** about AI impact and **grey** heard a lot about them.



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

The more youth have heard about AI's possible impacts on jobs and careers, the more likely they are to expect some impact and, specifically, that the impact will be negative. As information about AI continues to spread, it is increasingly important that the adults and institutions around young people are equipped to provide balance: honest acknowledgment of risks and uncertainties, combined with equally honest information about available opportunities and the steps young people can take to prepare for them.

6. Strong career literacy and network skills help buffer the pessimism that comes with greater AI awareness.

An important question for those who work with youth is what might be done to counteract anxiety and possible demoralizing effects of what youth hear about AI's negative impacts on their future career options. Stronger career literacy and network connections are possible ameliorating factors.

Career Literacy and Network Strength (CLNS)

The DeBruce Foundation's 2026 survey collected detailed information on a range of career-relevant knowledge and behaviors. Those include elements of career literacy like how confidently youth can identify how their strengths apply to different careers, how often they talk with others about their career interests, and whether they make concrete plans for the education and training they'll need. We also asked questions relative to enhancing their network strength, such as how comfortable they are reaching out to people outside their immediate network who could provide career guidance and opportunities.

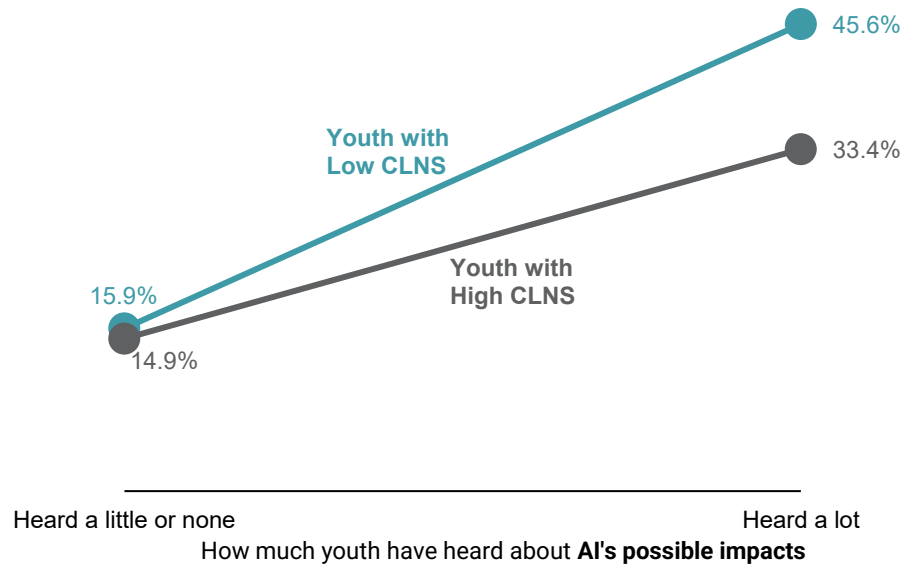
From these items, we created scales for Career Literacy (CL) and Network Strength (NS), respectively, then combined those into a single summary measure of Career Literacy and Network Strength (CLNS). See the Appendix for details on how the scales were created.

CLNS as a Buffer Against AI Pessimism

For the analyses below, we categorized youth who scored above the median on this CLNS scale as having high CLNS; those below the median as having low CLNS. Among youth who have heard a lot about AI's impacts, those with low CLNS are substantially more anxious than those with high CLNS. 46% of low-CLNS youth who have heard a lot strongly agree that AI makes them nervous about their career prospects, compared to 33% of high-CLNS youth who have heard a lot—a 12-percentage-point difference (see Fig 16).

That is not a difference that we observe among youth who have heard a little or nothing about AI's possible impacts on careers. Among those youth, the percent who strongly agree that AI makes them nervous about their career futures is about 15% to 16%, regardless of CLNS level. As a result, having heard a lot about AI's possible impacts is associated with a much lower increase in being in the most nervous category among youth with high CLNS (19 pct. points) vs youth with low CLNS (30 pct. points).

Figure 16. Percent of youth who "Strongly Agree" that AI makes them more nervous about career opportunities, by awareness level, by CLNS and awareness of AI

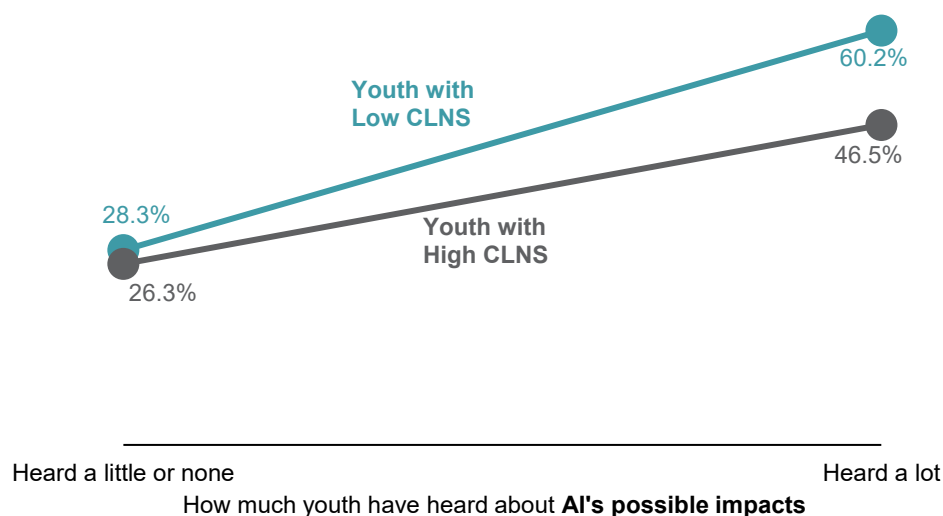


DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

CLNS and Expectations for AI Opportunities

The same protective pattern appears in expectations for whether AI will open or close career opportunities. Among youth who have heard a lot about AI's impacts, 60% of those with low CLNS expect AI to only close opportunities — compared to 47% of those with high CLNS, whereas, regardless of CLNS level, expectations are similar among youth who have heard little about AI's possible impacts.

Figure 17. Percent of youth who expect AI to close opportunities of interest without opening new ones, by awareness level, by CLNS and awareness of AI



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

The core implication is that career literacy and network strength function as a form of psychological resilience against AI pessimism. When young people have a clearer sense of how to navigate the job market and feel more comfortable reaching out to people who can help them, the destabilizing effect of alarming AI news is reduced. They can see more of the pathways available to them and feel more empowered to reach them.

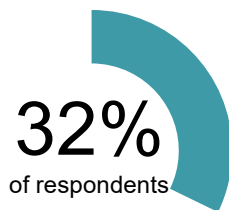
"Career literacy and network strength function as a form of psychological resilience against AI pessimism."

7. Most youth are interested in AI-enabled tools for career exploration, but many need help using them effectively.

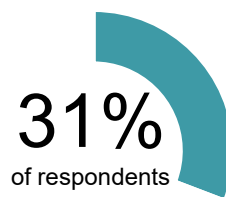
Despite widespread anxiety about AI's effects on career paths, most young people are interested in using AI tools to help them navigate those paths. But that does not mean that most youth are confident in being able to use AI tools to do that.

Most Youth Are Using or Interested in Using AI Tools

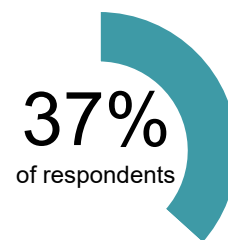
When asked which best describes how they feel about using AI tools to explore career options or search for jobs, 63% of youth say they use them, even if only 32% feel confident in their use.



use, and feel confident
about, AI tools for Career
Exploration.



use, and do not feel
confident about, AI tools
for Career Exploration.



do not use AI tools for
Career Exploration.

Interest in using AI tools for career exploration is higher than actual use. When presented with five specific career exploration tasks, 76% of youth expressed interest in AI assistance with at least one of the five. The most commonly cited interest was in tools that "help me understand what's needed to get into and succeed in careers of interest," named by 45% of respondents. Three other uses were each cited by 36–37% of youth:

- To help me learn about my own strengths and interests that I might not realize I have
- To learn which careers are likely to grow in the future
- To provide experiential opportunities to explore what different career paths are like

The Effective Use Gap

A key caveat to be aware of in working with youth is that even youth who have used AI tools for career exploration may need help doing so effectively. Among the 63% of youth who say that they have used AI tools for job searching or career exploration, nearly half say they are not confident they can use them well. This means roughly two-thirds of youth are either not engaging with these tools at all or engaging with them in ways they don't trust to be effective. In a labor market where career navigation is likely to become more challenging, career navigation tools are increasingly important, and where large numbers of youth are using AI tools regardless, that is a significant readiness gap.

Counselors, educators, and parents may also not feel confident using those kinds of tools. Building your own skills and confidence can put you in a better position to help them.

8. Interest in using tools for career exploration is strongly tied to whether youth expect AI to open new opportunities.

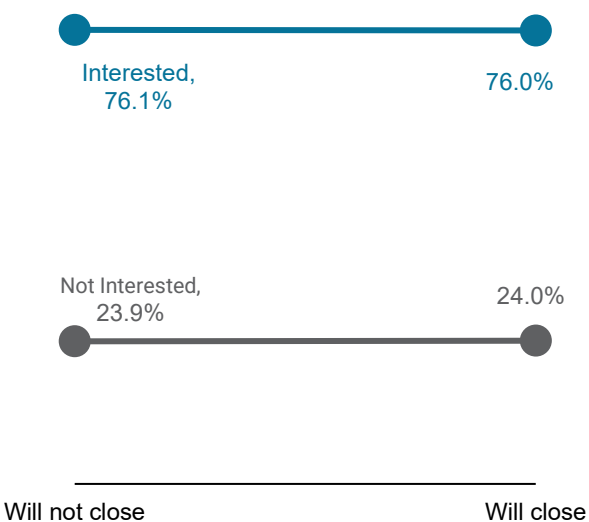
Earlier we saw that nervousness about AI's career impacts is driven much more by expectations about whether AI will close opportunities than by expectations about whether it will open them. For findings regarding interest in using AI tools for career exploration, we see the opposite pattern: interest is driven primarily by whether youth expect AI to open new opportunities.

Expectations for Opening of New Opportunities Drive Interest

Behavioral science has long established that people are more emotionally affected by potential losses than potential gains, a phenomenon known as loss aversion. Finding 3 was consistent with that: fear of AI closing career doors was a far more powerful driver of anxiety than hope that AI might open new ones. But youths' responses indicate that *interest in taking forward action* is instead driven more by the perception of new possibilities.

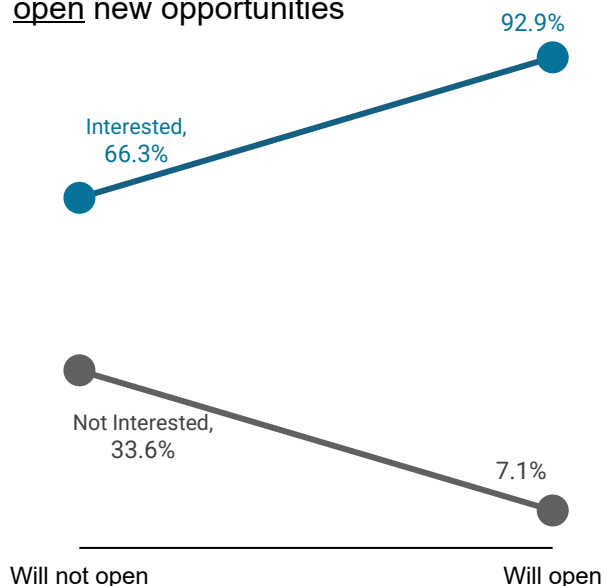
Youths' survey responses indicate that interest in using AI tools for career exploration is essentially the same whether or not a young person expects AI to close opportunities: 76.0% of those who expect AI to close opportunities are interested in AI career exploration tools, compared to 76.1% of those who do not expect AI to close opportunities. By contrast, among youth who expect AI to open new opportunities of interest, 93% express interest in using AI tools for career exploration. Among those who do not expect AI to open opportunities, only 66% are interested — a 27 percentage point gap.

Figure 18. Interest in using AI tools for Career Exploration, by whether AI will close opportunities



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Figure 19. Interest in using AI tools for Career Exploration, by whether AI will open new opportunities



DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey (2025-2026), n=702

Figure 21. Interest in AI tools for career exploration, by expectations for AI opening/closing opportunities.

What This Means for Engaging Youth

Taken together, Findings 3 and 8 suggest a nuanced picture of how youth relate to AI and career preparation. Fear of closing doors drives anxiety, while hope for opening doors drives engagement.

Efforts to reassure a nervous young person need to address the perception that AI will close career options they care about. That means providing honest, concrete information about which careers are likely to be affected and how, rather than generic reassurances that AI won't be "that bad."

Efforts to motivate a young person to actively explore and prepare need to cultivate the credible evidence of paths to opportunity. That means helping youth understand career opportunities that exist (including new ones AI may be creating), what skills and orientations position them to pursue those pathways and to resiliently navigate uncertainty and change, and how to build career literacy and network skills that will build their confidence and sense of control.

"Fear of closing doors drives anxiety; hope for opening doors drives engagement."

Appendix

Research Methodology

The DeBruce Foundation Emerging Youth Survey was administered by Alchemer in December 2025 and January 2026. The survey reached 702 young people ages 16–24 across the U.S. The survey sample was designed to produce representativeness on race, sex, and rural/metropolitan location. Survey weights were applied to all analyses to correct for minor deviations from representativeness in the unweighted sample.

Topics covered in the survey include:

- Career preparedness and career literacy
- Network strength and comfort with professional outreach
- Expectations of AI impacts on career futures
- Interest in and use of AI tools for career exploration

Career Literacy and Network Strength (CLNS) Scales

Our measure of **Career Literacy** draws on survey items capturing respondents' confidence in performing career navigation tasks (e.g., identifying how their strengths apply to different careers, applying for jobs) and the frequency with which they engage in career preparation behaviors (e.g., talking with others about work they would like to do in the future, making concrete plans for education or training needed for future careers). Each item is asked on a five-point Likert scale. For the first three questions (which form the “Advancement” subscale), respondents are asked to rate their agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Those items are:

1. I can determine how my interests and strengths can be of value in a variety of different career opportunities
2. I can clearly communicate my skills and interests to a friend, someone I work with, or a potential employer
3. I can easily navigate the process of applying for a new job (for example, look up job postings, gather information, develop a résumé or cover letter, fill out required forms, etc.

The CL Advancement subscale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82.

For the remaining five items (which form the "Vision" subscale), respondents are asked how often they engage in a particular career-related activity. Those items are:

4. Tell others about my career interests
5. Consider what careers my skills would be useful in
6. Talk to others about the type of work I want to do in the future
7. Talk about the type of job that I will be good at doing
8. Make a plan to get the education or training I will need for future jobs

The CL Advancement subscale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.

The **Network Strength** scale draws on items measuring respondents' comfort developing connections with people who could assist with career exploration. The scale is composed of the six items. For each item, respondents are asked to rate on a scale from 1 (Not at all comfortable) to 5 (extremely comfortable) in reference to the prompt "Thinking of people other than your close friends, family, and/or teachers, how comfortable are you" performing a given outreach activity. Those six are:

1. Getting career advice from others
2. Asking others for career help
3. Talking to others about career opportunities
4. Listening to others share information about their careers
5. Communicating with others to help advance my career
6. Getting connected to a career opportunity from others

The NS scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

Each of those scales was constructed by taking the averages of their component items. We then averaged the CL Advancement and CL Vision subscales to create an overall CL scale. To combine the CL and NS scales, which had different variances, we standardized each scale (converting to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1) before averaging them to produce the CLNS scale.

Prior Research Waves

This 2026 research follows three previous waves of research commissioned by The DeBruce Foundation in 2019, 2021, and 2023. The DeBruce Foundation will continue incorporating intelligence about best practices in education and career readiness to further the mission of expanding career pathways for all.

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