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### NH's Workforce: The Youth Retention Initiative For educational, occupational and residential futures in New Hampshire

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# NH's Workforce: The Youth Retention Initiative

*For educational, occupational and residential futures in New Hampshire*

Population out-migration in New Hampshire has generated efforts focused on retaining and recruiting young adults. This population is essential to the economy, workforce and vitality of our communities. We share the concerns about migration and population patterns within N.H. and recognize that efforts have focused mostly on young adults, not youth in middle and high school. **The Youth Retention Initiative** was designed to deepen understanding of how youth and emerging adults are considered in efforts to retain and recruit young people. As youth development and education researchers, we were also interested in learning about the messages young people hear about what is possible for them in our state and how these messages guide their future planning.

## Key Findings

### College Narratives Overshadow Career-oriented Work Narratives

The 4-year college-track is a well-defined pathway for youth and families in the state – it is a pervasive narrative and commonly suggested pathway. However, our interviews indicate cross-sector agreement that the “college for all” narrative (i.e. that success necessarily entails pursuing a 4-year college experience immediately after high school) likely precludes many youth and families from considering available career-oriented work opportunities. Although viable alternative pathways exist (including other post-secondary options) they are insufficiently defined, organized and communicated to youth.

### Stakeholder Assumptions

Stakeholders across different sectors share common assumptions about why youth leave the state. Impressions were consistent regarding:

- why many youth leave (high cost of higher education, to “spread their wings”)
- why some youth stay (lacking options, feeling connected to a place or a job)
- what course young people’s lives might take (move to a city temporarily, “boomerang” back to start a family).

These were reported as common pathways available to youth and many regarded these options as “normal.” These assumptions reveal some of the complex forces that may be influencing youth migration patterns. However, over reliance on these assumptions may limit the use of policy strategies that may be effective in retaining youth, such as supporting early exposure to available career pathways or investing in resources that build meaningful connections to communities such as recreation programs and facilities



This research was funded by the University of New Hampshire’s Collaborative Research Excellence (CoRE) Initiative designed to support interdisciplinary research that addresses issues facing our state, region, and beyond. Data for this study was compiled through interviews of 32 key informants in education, economic development, workforce development, and quality of life sectors across New Hampshire in 2021.

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### The Youth Retention Initiative Study Team

Dr. Andrew Coppens and Sarah Jusseaume, Department of Education

Dr. Cindy Hartman and Dr. Jayson Seaman, Department of Recreation Management and Policy

Dr. Erin Hiley Sharp, College of Health and Human Services

Molly Donovan, Cooperative Extension Community and Economic Development

## Lack of Youth-Supportive Policies and Efforts

Across education, economic development, workforce development and recreation sectors, stakeholders recognize the need to better integrate youth of middle and high school age as a priority into retention-promoting policy, planning and programming. Efforts to deepen youth engagement in local communities could be more evenly distributed around the state and conducted more systematically.

## Brand Identity

Our state's brand identity regarding outdoor and rural amenities, geographic proximity, family-oriented communities and fiscal policy were identified as a factor in migration patterns to and from N.H. However, the current brand identity may not resonate with middle and high school age youth and their life goals and may not be strong enough to lure them back.

## Cross-Sector Collaboration

Making progress on pathways that promote retention for young people will require stronger cross-sector connections, collaborations and investments. As one of our respondents put it, "we work together but we don't work together."

## Rural Communities as Resources for Future Planning and Career Aspirations

In a second study funded by the Spencer Foundation, we focused on understanding the experiences and perspectives of first-generation college students from rural communities. We discovered a wide range of ideas and opinions about young people's future planning. Some are motivated to stay and seek opportunities locally, while others are certain they want to leave home and avoid becoming "stuck in the cycle" as one participant described his peers who never left the community. Many young people feel a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to their community, yet given current circumstances, still plan on leaving for career opportunities that are clearer to them.

## Next Steps

### Research-Practice Partnership on Youth Retention

Once the groundwork has been laid, we hope to see:

1. expanded focus of efforts from early-career young professionals to youth and emerging adults still in the process of formulating future plans
2. enhanced coordination of postsecondary and vocational options considered as relevant to retention efforts and workforce opportunities
3. design interventions that help youth envision and access the various postsecondary options that are available to them

### Share Findings and Expand the Conversation

We will present research results more widely through a webinar, research engagement briefs and an academic publication. Please visit our website for more information.

- **Join us online:** [April 12, 2022](#), we will share research results and have a panel discussion with experts from around the state. Registration is required.
- **Conduct a follow-up study** to interview young adults who consider themselves to be "living a good life" in New Hampshire but didn't pursue a traditional pathway to a four-year degree immediately after high school. Potential pathways include earning a two-year degree, undergoing vocational training (e.g. apprenticeship) or advancement at a place of work. We plan to apply for funding from the Spencer Foundation in spring 2022.
- **What You Can Do:**
  - Join us on April 12, 2022 at 3:00 PM for a [webinar discussion](#), including a panel of state-wide partners
  - Talk about our research findings in your network
  - Invite us to present these findings to policy and thought leaders in the state
  - Contact us about your interest in our research and expanding our research-practice efforts



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