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Exploring Post-Secondary Pathways:

A Focus Group Study on Student Support and Aspirations in Washington State

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Exploring Post-Secondary Pathways

Executive Summary

The Washington Educational Research Association (WERA), in collaboration with the Gates Foundation, conducted focus group interviews with high school students across Washington State in the spring of 2024 to explore their experiences regarding post-secondary aspirations and support systems. The study gathered insights from 101 students from six school districts, aiming to understand the gaps in existing support systems and the quality of resources available for college, career, and workforce preparation.

Key Findings:

1. **Disparities in Support and Guidance**: The focus groups revealed significant inequities in the delivery of college and career readiness resources. Students expressed a strong demand for more direct interaction with teachers, increased experiential learning opportunities, and more personalized college and career guidance. They identified disparities in access to quality support, with some students receiving more robust counseling and others being left with little direction, which led to uncertainty and frustration.

2. **Teacher-Student Relationships**: Students highlighted the importance of relationships with teachers, citing mentorship and personalized guidance as pivotal to their academic success and career aspirations. The role of teachers as mentors was seen as more influential than the curriculum itself, as students valued teachers who showed genuine concern for their personal and professional goals.

3. **Financial Literacy Gaps**: A recurring concern was the lack of financial literacy education. Many students reported feeling unprepared for managing finances related to college, such as understanding student loans, budgeting, and filing the FAFSA. This gap in financial education left many students, particularly those from lower-income families, feeling disadvantaged when planning for postsecondary education.

4. **Rigid Graduation Requirements**: Students expressed frustration with inflexible graduation requirements, which often forced them into courses that were not aligned with their career interests or aspirations. The lack of elective courses and career-oriented options limited students' ability to explore potential career paths and gain practical, hands-on learning experiences.

5. **Pressure and Mental Health Concerns**: The pressure to attend a four-year college was a significant source of stress for many students. They voiced concerns about the unrealistic expectations placed on them, leading to academic burnout and mental health issues. Additionally, students who did not plan on attending a four-year college, such as those

interested in trade schools or joining the workforce, felt unsupported and marginalized by the school system.

6. **Equity and Bias**: The focus groups revealed concerns about inequities related to socioeconomic status, extracurricular involvement, and gender. Students from lower-income backgrounds reported having less access to resources and guidance, while some students noted favoritism towards athletes. These disparities contributed to a sense of unfairness and unequal opportunities among students.

Recommendations:

- **Expanding Experiential Learning**: Schools should integrate more hands-on, career-oriented learning experiences, such as internships and mentorship programs, to better align education with real-world career aspirations.

- **Personalized College and Career Counseling**: To support diverse student aspirations, schools should provide more personalized and inclusive guidance, addressing not only college-bound students but also those pursuing vocational or workforce pathways.

- **Enhancing Financial Literacy Education**: There is a need to integrate financial literacy into the curriculum, equipping students with essential life skills like budgeting, understanding loans, and managing debt.

- **Flexible Graduation Requirements**: Schools should consider more flexible graduation requirements to allow students to pursue electives and courses that align with their career interests, fostering a more personalized educational experience.

- **Addressing Mental Health and Academic Pressure**: Schools must create a more balanced academic environment that prioritizes student well-being, providing greater support for those experiencing academic stress and mental health challenges.

- **Ensuring Equity**: Schools should implement policies that ensure equitable access to resources, support services, and opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or career aspirations.

Conclusion:

The WERA Focus Group Project underscored the importance of student-centered, equitable support systems to help students navigate their postsecondary pathways. The findings highlight the need for more personalized guidance, flexible educational structures, and a greater focus on financial literacy and mental health to prepare students for life beyond high school. By addressing these gaps, Washington State schools can better equip students for future success, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to pursue their desired career paths, whether that involves higher education, vocational training, or workforce entry.

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Introduction

The Washington Educational Research Association (WERA) is committed to promoting research, evaluation, and empirically based decision-making to enhance educational outcomes for students throughout the state of Washington. WERA is a professional association that acts as a link between educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, facilitating collaboration and information sharing aimed at improving student achievement. By way of the association's various symposia, webinars, and statewide conference offerings, WERA has long stood as a critical information hub for its diverse constituencies.

In keeping with its mission, WERA, in collaboration with the Gates Foundation, launched a statewide focus group project in order to explore the aspirations and supports of Washington state's secondary students as they navigate their chosen postsecondary pathways. In conjunction with six geographically dispersed school districts, the project aimed to learn about the variation in resources, advising, and institutional practices that influence students' choices and readiness for life beyond high school. By organizing focus group sessions in these six representative school districts, this project created an opportunity for students to communicate their views regarding the effectiveness of school-based advising, access to college and career resources, and systemic obstacles affecting navigation of their educational pathway.

This report summarizes findings from the WERA Focus Group Project, offering an analysis of students' experiences, challenges, and recommendations. It begins with an overview of the aims and methodology of the project, clarifying the recruitment methods, data collection procedures, and the school districts covered. The subsequent sections detail the significant themes that emerged from these focus groups discussions, including disparities in postsecondary counseling access, the impact of teacher-student relationships on student aspirations, the significance of financial literacy instruction, and the impact of rigid graduation requirements on students' capacity to investigate college and career paths.

We conclude the report by offering actionable guidance to practitioners, policymakers, and school leaders committed to improving postsecondary readiness for all Washington State students.

Project Objectives and Methodology

In winter 2024, WERA disseminated a request for proposals among its district members to host and organize listening sessions with approximately 6-8 high school juniors and seniors. WERA's focus group project was viewed as one of a constellation of statewide projects initiated by the Gates Foundation designed to learn more about Washington state graduates, their aspirations, and the sources of support received en route to forming their post-graduate plans. In total six districts expressed interest in participating in the focus group study.

The WERA leadership assisted the participating districts by offering a standard protocol for focus groups, best practice training for facilitators in leading discussions, and equipment needed such as a

microphone for audio recording. WERA also offered monetary assistance in terms of a $200 VISA gift card for facilitator support, $25 gift cards as participant incentives, and $100 for session refreshments. WERA also established a secure file transfer system through which districts could send their recording, which was subsequently utilized for transcription and analysis.

The focus group protocol was developed with an eye to understanding students' experiences related to postsecondary planning and how the availability of institutional support could influence their aspirations. Particular focus was also given to the relationship between student perceptions and support systems offered by schools.

School District Participation and Study Population Characteristics

Six school districts located in geographically diverse regions of Washington State facilitated the focus group sessions. The table below lists each of participating districts, the regional and ESD distribution, as well as the number of focus group sessions each district conducted in support of the project.

As the table illustrates, a majority of participating districts came from the western side of Washington state. However, these districts are largely dispersed up and down the state's western side – as north as Bellingham and as south as Ridgefield. In addition, WERA's project organizers were able to ensure representation within central and eastern regions of the state, thus ensuring reasonable statewide representation.

Regional Breakdown of District Participation

District	Region/ESD	No. Focus Groups Conducted
Bellingham School District	Northwest/ESD 189	4
Clover Park School District	Western/ESD 121	2
Highline School District	Western/ESD 121	2
Quincy School District	Northcentral/ESD 171	2
Ridgefield School District	Southwest/ESD 112	1
Spokane School District	Eastern/ESD 101	2
Total:		13

District selection also emphasized a representation of both urban and more rural school districts.

Participant Demographics

Focus group data were gathered from February 19 to March 29, 2024. In total, 101 students participated in the focus groups across the six districts. These 101 participants represented various racial, gender, parent educational backgrounds, and possible career trajectories. The demographic makeup of the focus group participants is summarized below

- *Race:* The largest racial group within the study was White, constituting 35% of the sample and Hispanic individuals comprising 31%. Black students comprised 12%, while smaller

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percentages were Asian (2%), Native American (4%), and Pacific Islander (1%). One participant did not disclose racial identity, and a small percentage marked "Other" (1%)
.

- *Gender:* The gender distribution of participants was fairly even, with 50% of the participants female, 31% male, and 2% identifying as "other." The balance failed to respond to the question.

- *Grade Level:* Twelfth graders (54%) were largely overrepresented in the focus group sample as compared to 11th graders (29%).

- *Parental Education Levels:*
    - Maternal Education: A considerable percentage of the participants reported that their mothers possessed a high school diploma (21%) or a college degree (BA - 15%). It is noteworthy that 14% of the participants' mothers did not complete high school, whereas 7% held advanced degrees (MA/PhD).
    - Paternal: Likewise, 17% of fathers had an educational attainment lower than a high school diploma, and 20% had a high school diploma. Smaller proportions had some college training (5%) or possessed a bachelor's degree (7%).

- *Post-Graduation Trajectory:* For postsecondary plans, 35% of the respondents planned to attend a 4-year college, while 25% planned to attend a 2-year college. A notable, albeit small, percentage (7%) had other unspecified plans.

Focus Group Protocol & Key Discussion Areas

Each focus group session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. District facilitators were instrumental in establishing an open and inviting atmosphere that fostered candid dialogue. Facilitators led students through a guided protocol designed to explore critical aspects of the students' postsecondary experiences.

There were five major domains that served as the basis for the focus group discussions. They include the following:

- *Charting the High School Experience:* The students discussed how their coursework readied them for life after high school. Topics discussed included assessments of course rigor, frequency and diversity of exposure to career pathways, and the extent to which coursework informed their future career goals and aspirations.

- *Access to Supportive Adults:* This section examined students' relationships with mentors, teachers, counselors, and other supportive adults. Participants provided an account of their own perceptions of support during postsecondary planning. The protocol also probed for information on how/in what way school personnel acknowledged multiple post-high school trajectories, such as college, military, and direct entry into the workforce.

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- *Access to College and Career Resources:* Students weighed the availability and quality of services such as academic advising, financial aid counseling, job application support, and career exploration activities. Particular efforts were made to include students with workforce or military career paths so that their experiences were fully represented.

- *Identifying the Gaps and Challenges:* This section allowed students to articulate the challenges they experienced in preparation for life after high school, particularly regarding institutional support structures. Students provided innovative suggestions for improving the efficacy of guidance services, financial literacy programs, and career development initiatives in schools.

- *Closing Reflections*: To conclude the session on a positive note, participants shared their key learnings or posed additional questions.

The protocol also included opportunities for district-specific questions to ensure facilitators could pursue topics/areas of interest to their district and/or school. Embedding this opportunity into the data collection process also expanded the WERA study beyond the immediate scope of our study aims while also addressing unique concerns pertinent to district personnel.

Human Subject Protections & Data Security

A number of steps were taken to ensure research ethics and participant anonymity in the research process. These steps not only ensured against participant privacy breaches but also demonstrated the project's commitment to human subjects-related research ethics and data security. To this end, WERA established the following human subjects and data-related safeguards:

- *Informed Consent:* The focus group facilitators gathered parental and student consent prior to the participant's involvement in the study. This process ensured that the participants and their families were aware of the study's purposes and their students' rights as participants.

- *Data Security:* To ensure confidentiality, all audio recordings were stored safely and uploaded onto a third-party website. Transcriptions were made via a password-protected Otter.ai account, and only WERA-designees could have access to the data.

- *Data Sharing Agreements:* WERA entered into formal agreements with each district to establish mutual understandings about data access and security protocols.

- *Anonymity & Confidentiality:* As an adjunct to participant privacy protection, all transcripts were anonymized. All transcripts, recordings, and demographic forms were stored securely in a password-protected, WERA-owned Google Drive in order to uphold data integrity and confidentiality.

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Project Findings

This section describes findings generated from the district focus groups. The focus group conversations generated a number of essential themes that speak to the perceived quality of post-graduate students supports within Washington state schools. Students cited student-teacher relationships as a significant determinant of their academic success and career opportunities, referring to the tremendous influence of mentoring and personal connections on their own engagement and confidence levels. The students also voiced a stronger wish to be provided with more interactive, experiential learning experiences that corresponded with their anticipated career pathways, in addition to remarking on the sporadic and unequal provision of college and career guidance services.

Additional concerns expressed by participants included gaps in financial literacy education, rigid graduation requirements, academic stress, and bias in student experiences, all of which were causing students frustration and stress. These findings point to the critical necessity of designing caring, inclusive, and responsive learning postsecondary ecologies within schools that prioritize student well-being, personalized advising, and skills preparation to prepare students for their futures. We offer further detail on the significance of these themes in the discussion below.

The Importance of Instructor Interactions Compared to Curriculum Content

Across the focus groups, participants consistently stated that the relationships fostered with their teachers had greater bearing upon their own learning experience and subsequent educational plans than their coursework. This relational aspect of the connections conveyed by students was significant. The guidance, mentorship, and personal connections with teachers served to reinforce students' sense of self-assurance and engagement in the learning process. Most students indicated that the most helpful and significant parts of their learning experiences were from teachers who made the effort to learn about their personal and professional aspirations, as well as offer guidance outside of textbook knowledge. Students from across the focus groups pointed to their teacher-as-mentor as having an important influence on their emerging goals and motivation. Through one-on-one discussions, expert advice, or simply the demonstration of sincere concern and interest, these educators assisted students in exploring viable possibilities and envisioning their possible futures.

When teachers showed an openness to hear and invest in the success of their students, students showed higher motivation to participate in class activities, ask for help when needed, and take responsibility for their learning journey. Such a sense of connection often extended beyond the academic realm, affecting students' self-esteem, resilience, and overall well-being. Conversely, those students who felt they lacked connection with their teachers often shared feelings of frustration, isolation, or lower motivation.

A Strong Demand for Hands-On, Practical Learning

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A vast majority of students from all focus groups stressed that practical, experiential learning experiences were most helpful in their academic development and career preparation. Traditional classroom instruction, while necessary, often seemed disconnected from real-world application and left students with a sense of unpreparedness for life post-high school. Opportunities that allowed students to take an active role in career-driven skills development created a sense of drive, confidence, and understanding in terms of future educational paths.

Students commonly spoke about their confusion regarding the college application process, confusion regarding job application procedures, and the inaccessibility of job listings. Many felt that there was a need for greater and more realistic career readiness in schools.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses, internships, work-study, and industry classes generated unanimously positive reactions from focus group participants. Numerous students referred to these programs as instrumental in assisting them to reflect upon their personal strengths, build career interests, and establish professional contacts. They spoke of the significant advantages they felt in being exposed to different career fields, suggesting that schools served to expand the range of career possibilities – as well as constrain them. Conversely, numerous students were dissatisfied with conventional advisory programs, typical college planning software, and off-the-shelf career planning programs. These resources were frequently characterized as impersonal, standardized in nature, and limited in offering meaningful guidance that was specific to personal goals.

Another significant area of concern students highlighted was the lack of opportunities for them to engage in discussions regarding vocational studies and trade schools prior to their entry into high school. Numerous students indicated that these options were presented either too late in their educational journeys or not introduced at all. Students expressed resentment over their lack of awareness over other career options available besides the conventional four-year college pathway. This information gap led some students to express indifference over the range of vocational possibilities that existed for them after high school.

College and Career Counseling is Inconsistent and Often Inequitable

Focus group members felt that there was considerable variation in the availability and quality of college and career counseling services. Whereas some students expressed ease in receiving assistance from counselors, teachers, or career centers, other students reported that they were left on their own to try to figure out post-secondary planning with little direction, which led to a great deal of uncertainty and frustration. The inequity in the availability of quality guidance reinforced student perceptions of systemic unfairness as they tended to associate access to meaningful assistance with a particular school, district, or individual set of teachers.

Advisory programs were criticized extensively due to their variability in quality. Whereas some students viewed them as useful in terms of offering advice and resources for career development, others viewed them as boring and often inconsequential. The variability present in such programs too often led to varying levels of student preparedness, with some students receiving comprehensive, one-on-one attention, while others received standardized, generic approaches that did not meet their unique needs and aspirations.

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An ongoing issue was the inequity of guidance according to students' post-secondary aspirations. College-bound students most commonly received sequenced, guided help with applications, financial aid, and standardized tests, therefore securing access to required resources to further their post-secondary planning process. The students who were contemplating trade schools, the armed forces, or immediate entry into the workforce perceived that they had been ignored, unsupported, or even actively dissuaded in their efforts. Numerous students indicated little or no exposure to a number of career pathways, as well as insufficient discussion with regard to vocational training or guidance around alternative post-graduation options.

Financial Literacy and Career Readiness Gaps

Across all focus groups, students consistently expressed their frustration about the lack of financial literacy education being provided to them. Many participants expressed that important skills, such as the filing the FAFSA, understanding student loans, budgeting strategies, tax filing processes, and credit maintenance, were superficially covered or not covered at all within their courses. Without systematic financial education, students reported that they were left unprepared to navigate their financial futures, particularly as they entered adulthood and needed to make critical decisions over how to best finance their post-secondary pursuits. In addition to basic financial management, students identified weaknesses in their understanding of employment contracts, salary negotiation, and managing debt.

Many participants articulated that these foundational competencies were crucial for long-term career and financial sustainability but were rarely, if ever, touched on in school. Without structured instruction, students felt forced to learn these principles on their own, often through trial and error, thus compounding their distress around future financial choices.

Students expressed a strong desire to have financial literacy routinely incorporated into their schoolwork rather than as an add-on. Students wanted to incorporate interactive personal finance lessons within their math, economics, and career-readiness curricula so that, regardless of career path, they could be exposed to the financial management skills and knowledge needed for long-term personal and career success

Participants from less affluent families expressed particular disappointment over the lack of financial education since they weren't provided with adequate guidance about financing their postsecondary plans or provided with realistic assessments about the range of expenses they should expect once enrolled. A majority of students complained about being ill-equipped to handle financial aid processes, scholarships, and debt repayment procedures. This significant information gap for low-income, college aspiring students left many feeling distinctly disadvantaged when planning for the college costs.

Scheduling, Graduation Requirements, and Course Availability Limit Exploration

Participants in various focus groups conveyed their frustrations with inflexible graduation requirements, which often caused them to enroll in classes that were not aligned with their personal interests or career aspirations. Others felt that such requirements narrowed their capacity to work on

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things that would position them more effectively for their future career paths, thereby delaying their ability to pursue their interests in earnest.

This requirement "rigidity" was particularly troubling to students with non-traditional career paths who were seeking the flexibility to customize their learning experiences. One of the main obstacles that students listed was the small number of elective courses available to them. Students frequently noted that they were unable to take Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs or specialized classes due to required academic requirements. This limited students from being able to investigate possible career choices, skill-based trainings, and hands-on experiences that may have helped inform future career directions.

Another issue that was pointed out was the inflexibility in scheduling, especially for those students who wanted to pursue work, internship, or extracurricular opportunities. With the rising credit demands, students found it incredibly difficult to incorporate meaningful opportunities for a greater array of learning experiences into their academic schedules without overloading their coursework. Most of the students expressed interest in more customized scheduling arrangements that could enable them to balance their academic workload with real-world work experience and extracurricular activities.

Students gave mixed assessments of programs like Running Start and dual-credit opportunities. Though some appreciated the way these programs helped them advance their studies, and saved them money in college, others had difficulty keeping up with the added workload or found the level of expectation for college work too overwhelming. Since these programs varied so much in their structure and support, outcomes were extremely unequal, with some students excelling while others encountered serious difficulties.

The Psychological Toll of Academic Pressure and Post-Secondary Expectations

Students in several focus groups reported a great deal of stress associated with the pressure of post-secondary expectations. Many indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the general assumption that the only way to be successful was to attend a four-year college. This pressure, perpetuated by teachers, parents, and societal messaging, caused a great deal of anxiety – especially for those student who were uncertain about or resistant to taking a traditional college path. AP and Honors students especially complained about the heavy workload and the unrealistic expectations placed upon them. Several reported being exhausted and burnt out from the endless cycle of homework, tests, and after-school activities that gave little respite for rest or well-being.

The stress of excelling academically, being involved in multiple extracurricular activities, and developing a standout college application was a source of great psychological harm for students, with some feeling as though these expectations were simply beyond their grasp or ability to achieve.

Having to juggle schoolwork with work and extracurricular activities significantly impacted students' psychological well-being. Students who were required to juggle demands such as working, sports, or home duties were frequently left feeling overwhelmed and confronted with greater degrees of stress and fatigue. Being unable to manage several demands prompted some individuals to forfeit sleep, social life, or self-care routines, which further exacerbated burnout and anxiety experiences.

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Additionally, students who did not plan to attend a four-year college felt judged or unsupported by school staff. Most felt ignored in career readiness discussions because guidance materials were mostly created for college-bound students. Students who were thinking about attending trade schools, the military, or entering the workforce immediately following high school were frustrated with the lack of encouragement and materials to explore these avenues.

Students suggested that there was considerable need for a broader model of post-secondary guidance—one that could accommodate and support a range of student aspirations. Students felt that schools should prioritize mental health services, remove the stigma from non-traditional career paths, and foster an environment where students felt encouraged and supported to pursue the futures best aligned with their aspirations.

Prejudice and Disparities in Student Experiences

Students across focus groups highlighted concerns about bias and injustices in their school experiences, particularly in academic expectations, discipline, and resources. The majority expressed frustration with the overt favoritism often present within their school's culture, affecting their sense of fairness and opportunity. For instance, a subsection of students felt that athletes were often accorded special treatment. Some students felt that school leadership did not apply academic sanctions in a consistent and fair manner. It was felt that athletes who participated in high-profile sports were routinely afforded greater leniency than their non-athlete counterparts. This perceived favoritism caused resentment among the non-athletes as it was felt that they were held to higher expectations without receiving commensurate institutional support.

Students from lower-income backgrounds also reported disparities in access to education and personalized school supports. They felt that higher-income students had more access to educational resources, after-school activities, and personalized college or career planning. Having fewer financial resources generally meant having fewer opportunities for enrichment activities, test prep, or advanced classes, which put lower-income students at a disadvantage when it came to preparing for a postsecondary education.

Gender bias emerged as a pertinent topic in many of the discussions, especially in relation to academic expectations and requirements. Female students indicated that male athletes were frequently granted leniency in both academic and behavioral terms, which perpetuated the view that athletic success outweighed academic success. Further, several female students recounted incidents where they were dissuaded from assuming leadership positions or enrolling in certain subjects, thereby demonstrating the persistence of gender-specific inequities within their schools.

Study Implications

Reframing High School as an Asset for Future Success

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Many students described high school as failing to serve as an intentional stepping-stone to adulthood. While at the surface-level, this could be dismissed as a generational truism, our focus group data suggests students are alluding to an aspect of their schooling experience that is a bit more nuanced than a longstanding, general dissolution with life in US schools. Put simply, students do not view school as an opportunity for future-oriented personal and professional growth. They instead characterize their school experience as something to "get through'. The typical model of traditional classes, standardized tests, and rigid graduation requirements had a tendency to feel detached from students' real-world goals, which served to promote a feeling of disengagement.

For some, the most enriching learning took place outside of the classroom—via part-time work, internships, mentorship initiatives, and social networks. These experiences enabled students to acquire real-world skills, establish professional contacts, and gain experience in their chosen professions in ways that coursework could not. Students stated that they wished schools would acknowledge and incorporate these experiences into their education, instead of having a model that focuses more on academic milestones than transferable life skills.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Schools should consider expanding opportunities (and/or emphasizing existing opportunities) for experiential learning by integrating work-based learning experiences, internships, and mentorship programs into the curriculum. Policy shifts toward credit-bearing experiential learning, competency-based assessment, and more flexible graduation pathways could help students see high school as an asset rather than an obligation.

Creating Better Alignment between Student Interests and Career Goals

Students had a lot of respect for Career and Technical Education (CTE) classes, vocational electives, and trade classes, listing them as among the most inspirational and practical classes they had attended. The classes offered hands-on learning opportunities that appeared to have a direct connection to future employment opportunities. Yet, numerous students indicated that they could not take these classes due to scheduling conflicts, rigid graduation requirements, or an insufficiency of available elective choices. A common source of frustration was the limited course options available, especially for students seeking to tailor their academic experience to correspond with their desired career pathways.

Implications for Policy & Practice: Most believed that schools needed to offer more autonomy in scheduling so that students could take a wider variety of courses instead of being forced into a preordained course of study. A number of students suggested that secondary schools adopt a more modular system, incorporating more career-oriented curricula into the general education requirements to better meet students' diverse interests.

Greater Customization of Post-Secondary Guidance

Most of the students perceived intense pressure to seek a four-year college degree, even if they believed it would not be a good fit for their individual aspirations. Some part of these students believed that the 'college-for-all' mindset devalued other options, including vocational schools, apprenticeship, joining the military, or entering the workforce directly. It frustrated and disengaged

the students, particularly those interested in work-based career paths or encountered economic constraints to access college.

One of the ongoing issues identified was timing in relation to post-secondary planning and career exploration. Some students indicated that they learned about alternative options only in the later years of high school, often through incidental exposure or non-school sources. They felt schools did not adequately or expose them to timely non-traditional career options, therefore restricting their capacity to make knowledgeable choices regarding their future careers.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Students adamantly asked for more personalized, not one-size-fits-all, guidance in post-secondary planning. They wanted school counselors and advisors to take into account their individual strengths, interests, and financial situations when providing guidance, not assuming a four-year college degree was the norm or desired option.

Finding Balance between Academic Rigor and Student Well-Being

Students expressed mixed perceptions regarding academic demands and expectations. Some of the students believed that they were not well prepared for college and that their high school studies had not well prepared them for college rigors. They cited academic writing, research, and independent learning strategies as areas that were deficient and making the transition to college more difficult. On the other hand, other students believed that high school challenged them too early and too intensely. The demands of taking Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors classes, sustaining high GPAs, and staying involved in extracurricular activities produced academic burnout. These students perceived that high school needed to get a better balance between rigor and support, whereby students were adequately challenged without the feeling of becoming overwhelmed or having to struggle individually.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Students comments suggest that social, emotional, and physical well-being remain a significant challenge in the five years since COVID. While schools and districts have done a great deal to keep student well-being at the forefront, the evidence suggests that students continue to struggle. Student comments suggest a need to think innovatively around these issues. Innovations could include revising grading policy (i.e. standards-based grading initiatives), expanding access to academic support resources, and perhaps adopting a more flexible approach to learning that permits students to have greater control over their academic experience.

Ensuring Equitable Treatment for All Students

Students indicated that they had witnessed differences in the treatment and support they received according to their socioeconomic status, extracurricular activities, and gender. One of the common frustrations, in particular among Spokane students, was perceiving that athletes were given preferential treatment. Some students believed that academic and disciplinary standards were enforced irregularly, with athletes receiving preferential treatment from teachers and administrators. This created resentment on the part of non-athlete students, who believed they were being held to a different standard without comparable institutional support.

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Poorer students pointed to disparities in resources available to them. Most of them expressed that they had limited access to college preparation services, financial aid counseling, and enrichment programs compared to their more affluent counterparts. The absence of these forms of support severely limited their ability to maneuver through the process of applying for college or to consider alternative career options. In addition, some students expressed disappointment in the emphasis placed by counselors and administrators on four-year college-bound students, frequently at the cost of students considering trade school, military service, or other nontraditional career tracks. They felt that the guidance staff placed an undue emphasis on prepping university attendees, with little or no support offered to students considering alternative channels.

Implication for Policy and Practice: Schools should implement equity-driven policies that ensure all students—regardless of socioeconomic status or extracurricular involvement—have access to high-quality academic and post-secondary advising. This may include increasing transparency in how schools allocate resources and expanding support systems for students pursuing non-traditional career pathways. Additionally, districts should conduct equity audits to assess disparities in academic and disciplinary practices and ensure that all students receive fair treatment and opportunities.

Conclusion

The WERA focus group research outcomes underscore the urgent need for secondary schools to implement more flexible, equitable, and personalized pedagogies. The students made it quite clear that they want more relationships with teachers, more hands-on learning opportunities, and more inclusive advisory systems that provide access to all post-secondary options, including vocational training and workforce entry.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for more financial literacy education and re-tooling of the graduation requirements that now restrict students from engaging in meaningful, career-directed studies. In order to adequately prepare students for their futures, schools should create conditions for personalized attention, various post-secondary possibilities, and integrated advisement, thereby assuring every student the necessary tools and access required to succeed, irrespective of their background or desired pathway.

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