
Workforce Development | Focus Group Summary

Job Seekers and Small Businesses in Savannah, Georgia

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This research brief is part of a larger workforce study commissioned by Savannah Economic Development Authority, Savannah Chamber of Commerce, and United Way of the Coastal Empire.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
METHODS FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH	3
PARTICIPANTS	3
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS	4
JOB SEEKERS COMMUNITY	6
DEFINING MEANINGFUL WORK	6
SUPPORTING THE PATH TO MEANINGFUL WORK	8
CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL WORK	9
CONCLUSIONS	12
JOB SEEKERS CAMPUS	13
DEFINING MEANINGFUL WORK	13
SUPPORTING THE PATH TO MEANINGFUL WORK	17
CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFUL WORK	18
CONCLUSIONS	21
SMALL BUSINESS COMMUNITY	23
IDEAL CANDIDATES FOR ENTRY-LEVEL POSITIONS	23
HIRING CHALLENGES	26
CONCLUSIONS	29
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	31
JOB SEEKERS NEED MULTIPLE SUPPORTS TO ACHIEVE MEANINGFUL WORK	31
SMALL BUSINESSES SEEK A “SOFTER” TYPE OF EMPLOYEE	33
APPENDIX A (JOB SEEKERS)	35
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	35
DISCUSSION GUIDE (JOB SEEKERS)	36
APPENDIX B (SMALL BUSINESSES)	38
DISCUSSION GUIDE (SMALL BUSINESSES)	38

INTRODUCTION

The Savannah Economic Development Authority, Savannah Chamber of Commerce, and the United Way of the Coastal Empire commissioned a study of the workforce in Savannah, Georgia. These agencies seek to understand:

- Challenges that residents face when seeking meaningful employment
- Small business community's perceptions of the applicant pool for potential employees

This study focuses on job seekers who are in pursuit of, or have achieved, a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or high school diploma, technical or associates degree, or relevant certifications and licensures. The potential employment opportunities explored in this study might require some or all of these education achievements. Possible positions include, but are not limited to: administrative assistants (e.g., receptionist or data entry), sales staff, paraprofessionals, craft or construction laborers, and machine operators.

As part of this study, *bluknowledge LLC* was hired to conduct primary research in the form of focus group interviews. The summary of findings communicated in this research brief is intended to inform the greater workforce study.

METHODS | FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

In November 2013, *bluknowledge LLC* conducted six focus groups. Four focus groups included a total of 43 participants pursuing a GED certificate or a technical certificate or degree. Two focus groups included a total of 12 small business owners and representatives.

Participants

Job Seekers | Community

Twenty participants were enrolled in a GED program at a community site. These community participants were recruited because they were likely to live in low income or high unemployment census tracts.

Seventeen (85%) participants completed the demographic survey.

- Twelve survey respondents (71%) reported their gender as female and five (29%) survey respondents reported their gender as male.
- Seventeen survey respondents (100%) reported their race as African-American.
- Fourteen survey respondents (82%) reported an income less than \$19,999.
- Eleven survey respondents (65%) reported the receipt of public assistance (SNAP or WIC benefits).

See Appendix A for complete demographic information.

Job Seekers | Campus

Twenty-three participants were enrolled in a GED or trade-skills program on the Savannah Technical College campus. These campus participants were recruited because they were (a) concurrently enrolled in a GED and trade-skills program or (b) identified as "Fast Track" students who were expected to attain a GED certificate within three to six months.

Twenty-two (96%) participants completed the demographic survey.

- Eight survey respondents (36%) reported their gender as female and thirteen (59%) survey respondents reported their gender as male. One survey respondent did not answer the question.
- Fourteen (64%) survey respondents reported their race as African-American, five (23%) survey respondents reported their race as White, and one (5%) survey respondent reported his race as Hispanic.
- Three survey respondents (14%) reported an annual income less than \$19,999 and eleven survey respondents (50%) reported an annual income between \$20,000 and \$34,999.
- Five survey respondents (23%) reported the receipt of public assistance (SNAP or WIC benefits).

See Appendix A for complete demographic information.

Small Businesses

Twelve small business owners or representatives participated in two small business focus groups. There were eight participants in first group and four participants the second group. These participating small businesses represented multiple industries (e.g., manufacturing and home care assistance) and various sizes (4 - 1000 employees). See Table 1.

Table 1 | Small Business Participants (Industry and Size)

Industry	# Employees
Advertising Promotional Products	9
Architecture and Interior Design	14
Auto Repair and Maintenance	160
Business Advisory and Accounting	4
Business Telecommunications and Networking	16
Construction	20
Fire, Water and Mold Cleanup, and Restoration	22
General Contractor	14
Healthcare	10
Home Care and Assisted Living	1000
Legal and Identity Theft	40
Manufacturing Corrugated Boxes	18

In general, the group dynamics of each focus group was positive and collegial. Participants in the job-seeker focus groups were also supportive of each other, especially during the discussion of career aspirations. While all participants was engaged throughout each focus group topic, consensus about ideas and opinions varied. These will be noted in the findings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Dr. Tate facilitated all focus groups, which lasted 90 minutes. Using the appropriate discussion guide, she elicited participants' goals, predictions, reflections, and judgments related to workforce development. Table 2 presents the objective and key questions. Job seekers' discussions centered on the challenges and support they have experienced while seeking meaningful employment. (See Appendix A for detailed discussion guide.) The small businesses discussed challenges to hiring and retaining qualified entry-level employees. (See Appendix B for detailed discussion guide.)

Table 2 | Objective and Key Discussion Topics for Focus Groups

Job Seekers	Small Businesses
<p>Objective: To gain insight into the barriers (perceived and actual) to meaningful employment in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• participants’ definitions and expectations about meaningful employment• existing and desired supports while seeking meaningful employment• perceptions of barriers to meaningful employment.	<p>Objective: To gain insight into the perceptions of small businesses about the applicant pool for potential employees in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• requisite qualifications and characteristics for entry-level positions• perceived and actual challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
<p>Key Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your ideal job?• What steps does it take for you to achieve your ideal job?• How are you supported to achieve your ideal job?• What challenges might most people face when seeking their ideal job?	<p>Key Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your ideal candidate for an entry-level position?• What are the challenges to hiring qualified employees that meet the needs of your business?

A variety of elicitation techniques were used to encourage full participation. For the ideal job and candidate discussion, participants were prompted to write ideas on handouts prior to sharing aloud. Some questions requested participants to display numerical ratings (1-5) of confidence and difficulty, which were documented by the note taker. Participants ranked a set of challenges by voting for the top three with sticker dots. During the discussions related to supports and challenges, the facilitator listed participants’ ideas on chart paper. Throughout the focus group, the facilitator checked for consensus, restated comments for clarification, and prompted participants to elaborate their responses.

All focus groups were audio recorded, with participants’ consent, and transcribed for content. The note taker wrote notes during each group and the facilitator wrote reflections following each group to capture any immediate insights. The written responses on the handouts were coded into categories and characterized into themes. Chart paper notes were reviewed and characterized into themes. The mean and standard deviation were calculated for each set of confidence and difficulty ratings. Transcripts, written notes, and reflections were used to fill in missing information, provide additional context, and inform interpretation.

In this research brief, a summary of findings for the job seekers and small business community will be presented. The community and campus groups will be discussed separately. Next, the results for the small business community will be presented. This brief concludes with a review of key findings and a set of recommendations for workforce development that are relevant to job seekers and the small business community.

JOB SEEKERS | COMMUNITY

Defining Meaningful Work

To establish a working definition of meaningful work, the initial conversation elicited participants' ideas about their ideal jobs. Each participant shared one to two ideal jobs they wished to pursue. Then, they shared how working that ideal job would affect their lives.

Ideal Jobs

Twenty participants in the community groups envisioned meaningful work across a variety of occupations and careers.

- Thirty-nine ideal jobs were reported.
 - Eleven (28.2%) ideal jobs related to medical field. Eight (20.5%) were nursing positions, including: certified nursing assistant (CNA), licensed practical nurse (LPN), and registered nurse (RN). Medical assistant, surgical technician, and anesthesiologist were also mentioned.
 - Four (10.3%) related to the culinary field (e.g., chef).
 - Two (5.1%) related to the mechanics field (e.g., diesel mechanic).
 - Two (5.1%) related to the computing field (e.g., computer technician).
- Occupations that were reported only once included: welder, real estate agent, electrician, mechanical engineer, lawyer, mass communications occupation, heavy equipment operator, human resources manager, and truck driver.
- Several participants reported pairs of jobs or careers that differed greatly from each other, such as: nurse and computer technician, diesel mechanic and lawyer, electrician and culinary artist, cosmetologist and medical assistant, and nurse and chef.
- Seven (35%) jobs seekers reported the desire to business owners. Their businesses are related to their ideal jobs and included: cleaning service, computer repair shop, real estate agency, hair salon, mechanic shop, and restaurant.

It is important to note that most participants discuss their ideal jobs as a *first career*. Few shared that they experienced a substantial career prior to his or her current pursuits.

Reasons for Pursuing Ideal Jobs

Twenty participants in the community focus groups shared 35 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Eight (22.9%) related to performing the activities of the job.
- Seven (20%) related to learning more or interacting with people.
- Seven (20%) related to helping people.
- Seven (20%) related to owning a business, creating jobs, or being their own boss.
- Six (15.4%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money.

Path to Ideal Job

Participants shared three to five steps toward their ideal jobs, which generated a total of 62 milestones related to education, work experience, business ownership, personal development, and job-seeking skills.

- Forty-one (66.1%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate.
- Eleven (17.7%) related to work experience (e.g., internship) and six (9.7%) related to business ownership (e.g., business license or raise startup funds). These milestones emerged in participants' third steps.
- Four (6.5%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).
- One (1.6%) related to job-seeking skills (e.g., interviewing skills).

Confidence to Achieve Ideal Job

Participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the likelihood that they will achieve (a) their ideal job in one, three, or five years and (b) the first, second, and third steps on the path to their ideal job.

In each focus group, participants displayed a card with the number that reflected their confidence ratings. The facilitator quickly reviewed each participant's rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants' reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

When rating more distant points in the future, participants showed increased confidence that they will achieve their ideal job. (See Table 3.)

Table 3 | Confidence Ratings for Achieving Ideal Job in 1, 3, and 5 years

	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5
Mean (Standard Deviation)	2.84 (1.42)	4.47 (0.84)	4.95 (0.23)

- On average, participants indicated higher confidence levels when rating the likelihood of their future achievements by the year-three point compared to their ratings at the year-one point. This may be due to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first step. Nineteen (95%) participants reported their first step as attaining a GED certificate.
- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by the year-five point, nineteen (95%) participants displayed a confidence rating of five. When asked, several participants reported that sufficient time would have elapsed in order for them to achieve their ideal job. There seemed to be a general consensus for this reasoning among group participants.

When rating the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps of the path toward their ideal job, eighteen (90%) participants reported a high level of confidence across all steps. While participants articulated chronological paths, the emphasis on milestones, rather than time, seemed to shift their perceptions of confidence.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be (a) bolstered by self-

confidence in abilities or a sheer determination to achieve or (b) tempered by time due to uncertainty of family responsibilities, inability to predict one's situation, or possible switch in job or career choices.

Supporting the Path to Meaningful Work

As a whole group, participants generated a list of persons and programs that have the potential to support job seekers like them. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately.

When asked "Who supports you on the path toward your ideal job?" participants in both community groups quickly reached consensus on the list of supports in their social network. As the discussion extended to programmatic supports, both community groups were less generative. To elaborate the discussion, the facilitator prompted participants to consider specific types of programs, such as those that help with job-seeking skills (e.g., interviewing skills). Often, one or two participants were the primary contributors. Other participants would add details or note that this was new information to them. Given these group dynamics, the findings related to programmatic supports represent a full listing of existing services generated during the discussions.

Existing Supports

Most participants shared that they seek support within their social networks:

- **Family and Friends:** Many participants reported parents, spouses, siblings, and children and grandchildren as supporters. One participant mentioned that family might help with childcare. Several participants explained that their children or grandchildren might also help them with schoolwork. A few participants shared that family members encourage them stay focused on their goals.
- **Classmates:** Several participants reported that observing their classmates helped them stay motivated to achieve their goals.
- **Teachers:** Several participants reported that their teachers offer encouragement (e.g., "don't give up") and motivation, and increase their confidence. One participant reported that past teachers have maintained a relationship with them to see how she has progressed toward her education and career goals.
- Other potential supports reported included coworkers, neighbors, and the faith community.

A wide range of community programs offer support:

- Community-based or nonprofit programs offer a set of services that include social, educational, and fiscal supports.
 - **Union Mission** refers residents to social programs and donations; counseling to help people find grants for school or housing.
 - The **St. Joseph's Candler St. Mary's Community Center** hosts eye clinic and provides support with filing taxes.
 - The **Moses Jackson Advancement Center** offers support with filing taxes and free classes to earn commercial driver's license (CDL).
 - The **Housing Authority of Savannah** offers computer classes and home ownership guidance.

- Several participants identified local supports for GED classes and job-related classes and training.
 - In addition to GED classes offered at community sites, such as **Housing Authority of Savannah and Moses Jackson Advancement Center**, job seekers can also receive academic support from the **Royce Learning Center**.
 - Some job seekers can receive assistance from the **Job Corps**, a residential program that simultaneously offers GED classes and job training for a trade.
 - Beginning in January, **St. Mary's Community Center** will host Accelerating Opportunity Patient Care Technician program.
- When prompted, a few participants shared several job-seeking resources to support the journey toward their ideal job.
 - The **Department of Labor** coordinates one-on-one interviews with applicants and potential employees, offers classes, and provides referrals to jobs.
 - **Goodwill** (on Sallie Mood Drive) teaches job skills to persons with disabilities.
 - The **St. Joseph's/Candler St. Mary's Community Center** offers job placement or career counseling.
 - **Step Up** provides assistance with writing cover letters and resumes and conducts mock interviews.
 - Other resources that participants mentioned included job fairs, temporary or staffing agencies, and on-the-job training opportunities.
- Aspiring business owners cited the **Small Business Administration** as a support because it helps new business owners write proposals, apply for loans, and obtain advice for starting a new business.

Desired Supports

Many participants expressed that they need the most support with completing their GED certificate and finding work experiences. Some wanted more job-seeking supports, such as assistance writing a resume.

Given the diversity of reported ideal jobs, several participants desired more job training opportunities in a variety of fields. A few participants shared that they would like to see more opportunities like Savannah Technical College's Accelerating Opportunity Patient Care Technician program. One participant reported that this program is currently limited to thirty students; she desired more openings.

Finally, several participants requested fiscal supports as they work toward achieving their ideal jobs. Some described financial aid or scholarships as possible supports while they pursue a GED certificate or future degrees. As well, money for childcare, gas, and computers were mentioned as needed supports. In one community group, there was a disagreement between two participants about whether individuals should receive financial assistance versus "make it on their own". Generally, most participants agreed that fiscal supports would benefit them.

Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work

Research for this larger study included a literature review that revealed multiple barriers to meaningful employment at the national, regional, and state levels. During the focus groups, each participant identified the top three barriers (referred to as challenges) that most people might face when seeking meaningful employment. (See Table 4 for rankings.)

As a group, participants discussed some of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes describe the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Note: One community group discussed discrimination and the other community group discussed criminal background and education and training.

Key Challenges

Education and Training

- ***Importance to Employers:*** There was consensus among participants that education and training are most important to employers. One participant emphasized this point by stating, "if I flip burgers, I have to have a GED or high school diploma."
- ***Costs:*** Some participants mentioned that education and training could be challenging due to costs.
- ***Different Job Requirements:*** A few participants discussed how job requirements have changed for older job seekers. They explained how hotels prefer staff, including front desk receptionists, to be bilingual. Also, for job seekers who attended high school "a while ago", some classes or skills that are required now were not even offered then, such as foreign language.
- ***"It's Who You Know":*** Several participants explained that in the past, employers would give a person a chance even if he or she did not have the required education. These employers may have believed the he or she would "train well". Participants also explained that if an employer knew the person's family, they would "vouch" or speak up for them. There was consensus among the participants in the focus group that these sentiments were valid.

Criminal Background

- ***Limited Opportunity for a Second Chance:*** With regard to criminal background, there was consensus that a person's "mistake" or criminal conviction follows them for the rest of his or her life. Many participants agreed that being a convicted felon could prevent him or her from getting a job.
 - Several participants explained that a person with a criminal background might receive a second chance, if:
 - sufficient time passes. For example, a DUI can hold you back from obtaining a commercial driver's license (CDL). You need to have a clean record for 5 - 7 years.
 - his or her record has been expunged as part of a first offender's program. This costs money and takes times.
- ***It's cyclical:*** Several participants explained that a person is unable to find employment after "serving their time", and his or her chances of returning to prison increases.
- ***Few Employers Hire:*** Most participants were unsure about which companies hire applicants with a criminal background.

- **Uneven Application of Policy:** A few participants have observed that companies’ hiring policies related to criminal background are not applied across the board for everyone. For example, if the hiring manager knows the person with a criminal record, then they might look past it.

Table 4 | Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work (ranked)

Challenges*	Number of votes (#)	Percentage of votes (%)
Education and Training	9	17.0%
Child care	8	15.1%
Discrimination	8	15.1%
Health	6	11.3%
Criminal background	5	9.4%
Transportation	5	9.4%
Home life	5	9.4%
Disability	3	5.7%
Drug use	3	5.6%
Job-seeking Costs	1	1.9%

* Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Discrimination

- **Multiple Forms:** Most participants agreed that some people who hire discriminate against race or religion. Some participants explained that the discrimination is not just limited to African Americans, and that some hiring managers also discriminate against appearance (e.g., tattoos, hair).
- **Multiple Sources:** Participants also reported that in addition to discrimination by managers or supervisors, coworkers also discriminate. This could be observed in conversations or in the exclusion of certain coworkers from conversations.
- **Multiple Points:** Several participants reported that they experienced discrimination prior to getting the job and while they were employed. One participant explained that a person might be passed over for a promotion due to discrimination. Several participants agreed discrimination increases as they move up professionally.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants rated the difficulty associated with overcoming challenges on a scale of one (not difficult) to five (very difficult). The rated challenges included education and training, criminal background, and discrimination. According to participants’ ratings, they perceive these challenges as quite difficult to overcome when seeking meaningful employment. For example, a participant shared that a person’s difficulty in navigating life contributed to the challenges related to education and training. Given the themes discussed earlier, the challenge of criminal background seemed insurmountable to participants.



Finally, to reduce job seekers’ perceptions of difficulty related to discrimination, employers must take responsibility for maintaining a fair and equitable workplace free from discrimination.

Table 5 | Difficulty Ratings for Overcoming Challenges to Meaningful Work

	Education and Training (N=7)	Criminal Background (N=7)	Discrimination (N=11)
Mean (Standard Deviation)	4.00 (1.00)	4.71 (0.49)	4.18 (1.25)

Conclusions

Participants in the community focus groups described meaningful work in diverse ways with respect to career aspirations (e.g., nurse or business owner) and reasons for career pursuits (e.g., do something they enjoy or help people). They articulated a clear, chronological path toward their ideal job. Most emphasized educational milestones during the early steps (e.g., obtain GED certificate or enroll in college) with increased mention of milestones related to work experience or business startup (e.g., secure funding) in later steps.

For each step in their articulated path, participants maintained a high level of confidence that they will achieve success. When thinking about their path over one, three, and five years, they tempered their confidence early because of uncertainty due to family responsibilities, potential life changes, or the significance of accomplishing their first educational milestone (e.g., attain GED certificate). When asked to consider the likelihood of achieving their ideal job in three years, participants increased their confidence. They maintained this high confidence when considering the likelihood that they will achieve their ideal job or career by year five. This increased confidence might be due to participants’ perceived significance and immediacy of the first educational milestone or they might find it difficult to imagine future challenges.

Most participants in the community focus groups have some awareness of, have utilized, or plan to utilize educational, social, and financial supports beyond their personal networks. They desire the most support in completing their GED certificate and securing work experiences. Participants also requested financial assistance in the form of grants, scholarships, or stipends for childcare and transportation.

Finally, education and training, criminal background, and discrimination emerged as the top three barriers to meaningful employment among this group of participants. While these participants remain confident and determined to achieve their ideal jobs, their difficulty ratings emphasized that these challenges represent significant barriers to meaningful employment.

JOB SEEKERS | CAMPUS

Defining Meaningful Work

To establish a working definition of meaningful work, the initial conversation elicited participants' ideas about their ideal jobs. Each participant shared one to two ideal jobs they wished to pursue. Then, they shared how working that ideal job would affect their lives.

Ideal Jobs

The campus group was comprised of two GED classes that included participants enrolled in either the Accelerating Opportunity welding class or the Fast Track program. Noteworthy differences between these groups emerged with respect to the ideal jobs discussion only. Therefore, the findings will be presented separately. The supports and challenges sections will present findings across both classes.

Welding Job Seekers

Twelve participants in the welding class envisioned meaningful work as a variety of occupations and careers.

Twenty-three ideal jobs were reported.

- Eleven participants (91.7%) listed welder as their ideal job.
 - When asked, seven participants (58.3%) reported that they decided to become a welder before they heard about this Accelerated Opportunity program. A few participants considered this job as a means to earn money while pursuing other interests.
- Two jobs (8.7%) related to business ownership.
- Two jobs (8.7%) related to the aircraft technician field.
- Two jobs (8.7%) related to driving trucks.
- Occupations that were reported only once included nurse, chef, computer technician, and pilot.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Eleven Fast Track participants envisioned meaningful work across a variety of occupations and careers.

Nineteen ideal jobs were reported.

- Three (15.8%) related to the mechanics field (e.g., diesel mechanic).
- Three (15.8%) related to business ownership, in particular, a restaurant, family business, and consulting company.
- Two (10.5%) related to the aerospace field (e.g., aircraft technician).
- Two (10.5%) related to the medical field, in particular, medical assistant and patient care technician.
- Occupations that were reported only once included cosmetologist, deputy sheriff, firefighter, professional musician, sports coach, youth counselor, arson investigator, and air and heating technician.
- Several participants shared pairs of jobs that differed greatly from each other, such as beautician and mechanic, medical assistant and aircraft technician, and patient care technician and deputy sheriff.

Reasons for Pursuing Ideal Jobs

Welding Job Seekers

Welding participants shared 30 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Eighteen (60%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money. Participants considered welding an in-demand, secure field where you earn a high salary.
- Four (13.3%) related to travel.
- Three (10%) related to performing the activities of the job. The only job-specific reasons provided related to the culinary arts and real estate jobs. None of the reasons provided for welding described any related skills or services (e.g., put things together, build things, or work with metal).
- Two (6.7%) related to career advancement.
- Two (6.7%) related to a desire to learn more.
- One (3.3%) related to owning a business and creating jobs.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Fast Track participants shared 24 reasons for pursuing their ideal job.

- Seven (29.2%) related to helping people.
- Five (20.1%) related to providing for self and their family, or to making money.
- Four (16.7%) related to career advancement.
- Three (12.5%) related to performing the activities of the job.
- Three (12.5%) related to learning more or interacting with people.
- Two (8.3%) related to owning a business, creating jobs, or being their own boss.

Path to Ideal Job

Participants shared three to five steps toward their ideal jobs related to education, work experience, business ownership, personal development, and job-seeking skills.

Welding Job Seekers

Welding participants generated a total of 38 milestones.

- Twenty (52.6%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate. No education milestones appeared in the later steps.
- Ten (26.3%) related to work experience and four (10.5%) related to job-seeking skills (e.g., interview skills). These milestones appeared in some participants' second steps and most participants' third steps.
- Two (5.3%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).
- One (2.6%) related to business ownership.

Fast Track Job Seekers

Fast Track participants generated a total of 33 milestones.

- Twenty-two (66.7%) focused on education-related activities such as enrolling in or graduating from school. All first steps centered on achieving their GED certificate.
- Three (9.1%) related to work experience and five (15.2%) related to business ownership such as secure an internship, achieve a business license, or raise startup funds.
- Three (9.1%) related to personal development (e.g., focus and discipline).
- Zero related to job-seeking skills.

Confidence to Achieve Ideal Job

Participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the likelihood that they will achieve (a) their ideal job in one, three, or five years and (b) the first, second, and third steps on the path to their ideal job.

In each focus group, participants displayed a card with the number that reflected their confidence ratings. The facilitator quickly reviewed each participant's rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants' reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

When rating more distant points in the future, participants showed increased confidence that they will achieve their ideal job. (See Table 6.)

Table 6 | Confidence Ratings for Achieving Ideal Job in 1, 3, and 5 years

		Year 1	Year 3	Year 5
Job Seekers	N	Mean (Standard Deviation)		
Welding	11	3.36 (1.21)	4.55 (0.69)	4.64 (0.67)
Fast Track	10	4.10 (1.45)	4.60 (0.70)	4.80 (0.42)

Welding Job Seekers

- On average, participants indicated higher confidence levels when rating the likelihood of their future achievements by the year-three point compared to their ratings at the year-one point. This may be due to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first step. Twelve participants (100%) reported their first step as attaining a GED certificate or graduating from school.
- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year one, five participants (45.5%) reported high confidence. This may be due to the length of the Accelerating Opportunity program, about nine months. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, three participants predicted that they would be working within one year.

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by the year-five point, eight participants (72.7%) displayed a confidence rating of five. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, two participants predicted that they would have changed jobs within five years.

Twelve participants rated the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps of the path toward their ideal job. Ten participants (83.3%) reported a high level of confidence across all steps or gradually increased their confidence ratings for each subsequent milestone.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be bolstered by (a) self-confidence in abilities or a sheer determination to achieve; (b) expressed support from classmates, teachers, and family; and (c) expectations that they will return to a previous job or secure a job through networking connections. They also reported their confidence to be tempered by time due to a hesitance to, “put all their eggs in one basket”, the inability to predict the economy or workforce demand, or possible changes in job or career choices.

Fast Track Job Seekers

- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year one, participants reported, on average, higher confidence ratings than other participants in the community groups and the welding campus group. Similar to the other groups, the majority of participants identified their first milestone as attaining a GED certificate. The expectation that the Fast Track participants will attain their GED within three to six months might explain these differences in reported confidence levels. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, several participants reported that their next step, earning a certificate or a degree in their desired field, could be achieved within one year.
- When rating the likelihood of future achievements by year five, eight participants (80%) reported a confidence rating of five. There seemed to be a general agreement among participants that five years was enough time to achieve their ideal job. When prompted to explain her confidence rating, one participant predicted that five years would be sufficient time to achieve a job where she can earn enough money to save for business start-up costs.

All participants reported a high level of confidence across at least two steps when rating the likelihood for future achievement of the first, second, and third steps in their articulated path toward their ideal job. When prompted to explain their confidence ratings, a couple of participants expressed some concerns about not achieving their intermediate steps because of a physical condition or a past experience. The facilitator followed up with them after they displayed high confidence ratings for the likelihood that they would achieve the third step articulated in their path. Both explained that they were more confident about achieving their third steps because they would have overcome challenges earlier in their path.

Throughout the discussion about seeking meaningful work, several participants were asked to explain their confidence ratings. These participants reported their confidence to be bolstered by self-confidence in abilities, or a sheer determination to achieve, or tempered by time, due to difficulty in securing startup funds (potential business owners), health conditions, inability to predict if they will secure meaningful employment, or possible change in job or career choice.

Supporting the Path to Meaningful Work

As a whole group, participants generated a list of persons and programs that have the potential to support job seekers like them. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone's ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately.

Initially, participants were asked to identify people in their social networks who have supported them as they seek their ideal jobs. In both campus groups, participants quickly reached consensus on the list of supports in their social network. As the discussion extended to programmatic supports, both campus groups were less generative with respect to the (a) prior discussion about social networks and (b) participants in the community groups. To elaborate the discussion, the facilitator prompted participants to consider specific types of programs, such as those that coordinate networking opportunities with employers. Often, one or two participants were the primary contributors. Other participants would (a) add details, (b) note that this was new information to them, or (c) inquire about how to learn more about the shared opportunities. Given these group dynamics, the findings related to programmatic supports represent a full listing of existing services generated during the discussions.

Existing Supports

Most participants shared that they seek support within their social networks:

- **Family and Friends:** Most participants generated a list of personal supports that included: parents, spouses, siblings, children and grandchildren, and significant others. When asked to explain how family and friends offer support, one participant shared that her family might help out financially by providing money for transportation (e.g., bus pass). Several participants also shared that family members encourage them to stay focused on their goals. A few participants also mentioned that their children or grandchildren help them with schoolwork.
- **Classmates:** Several participants considered their classmates a source of information. There was shared appreciation among the welding participants that they will remain a cohort for the duration of the Accelerating Opportunity program.
- **Teachers:** There was consensus among participants that their teachers were source of encouragement and motivation, and helped students to remain confident. A few welding participants shared that they expected their teachers to help them with the job search process. Specifically, their GED teacher would help to hone their interview skills and their welding instructor would provide referrals to potential employers.
- **School Administration:** A few participants mentioned that campus counselors offered assistance with the job search process.

A wide range of programs offer support:

- Several agencies offer a set of services that include: social, educational, and fiscal supports.
 - The **Housing Authority of Savannah** provides housing assistance and administrative support to help people who have difficulty paying their utility bills.
 - The **Department of Labor** provides money to supplement living expenses.
 - The **Department of Family and Children Services** offers SNAP benefits to help with living expenses.

- Several participants identified local supports for GED classes and job-related classes and training.
 - Most participants agreed that **United Way** was a source of support. This agency funds the Accelerating Opportunity welding program, which includes free tuition for students, clothing, and equipment. This program also provides referrals for jobs.
 - The **Department of Labor** provides training for careers (e.g., electrician and truck driver).
 - The **Housing Authority of Savannah** also offers GED classes.
 - Some employers pay for education or professional development classes.
- When prompted, some of the participants shared a few job-seeking resources to support the journey toward their ideal job.
 - Participants mentioned that there was a job interview program on campus, but they were unsure about where it was located.
 - The **Army Career and Alumni Program** offers support, such as computer classes and learning to write a resume. The program also connects job seekers with employers.
 - Participants also mentioned job fairs.

Desired Supports

During the discussion about supports, many participants expressed that they were unfamiliar with programs that can provide support them as they seek meaningful employment. As reported earlier, one or two participants served as the primary contributors to the programmatic supports discussion. A few other participants asked about how they could learn about the programs mentioned.

Most participants indicated that they needed the most support with obtaining their education (e.g., GED certificate and future degrees). Several participants also desired assistance with (a) securing steady employment so they can save money, (b) business startup activities (e.g., networking and obtaining funding), and (c) personal development. Similar to a discussion in one of the community groups, two participants in one of the campus groups disagreed with each other about whether it was appropriate to receive various forms of public assistance (e.g., unemployment benefits). One participant insisted that, “You have to make your own. You can't expect everybody to do it for you. You have to really ask for help if you need it.” Other than this dissent, there was consensus among participants that fiscal supports, such as money for childcare and transportation expenses, would benefit them as they work toward achieving their ideal jobs.

Challenges to Meaningful Work

Research for this larger study included a literature review that revealed multiple barriers to meaningful employment at the national, regional, and state levels. During the focus groups, each participant identified the top three barriers (referred to as challenges) that most people might face when seeking meaningful employment. (See Table 7 for rankings.)

As a group, participants discussed some of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone’s ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes describe the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Note: One campus group discussed criminal background, drug use, and transportation. The other campus group discussed education and training and criminal background.

Table 7 | Challenges to Achieving Meaningful Work (ranked)

Challenges *	Number (#) of votes	Percentage (%) of votes
Criminal background	18	26.9%
Transportation	12	17.9%
Education or Training	11	16.4%
Drug use	9	13.4%
Child care	6	9.0%
Discrimination	5	7.5%
Health	3	4.5%
Home life	2	3.0%
Disability	1	1.5%
Job-seeking Costs	0	0%

* Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Key Challenges

Education and Training

- **Important to Employers:** Participants generally agreed that education and training are most important to employers. Some participants emphasized this point with the following sentiments:
 - Without certain education and training, it limits the position a person can obtain. He or she will get "low balled."
 - A person needs a certificate to move up into management. This applies even if the candidate has experience.
- **Costs:** There was consensus among participants that education and training can be challenging due to costs.
 - A few participants explained that sometimes the initial investment is not proportional to the earnings received. For example:
 - To become an armed security guard, a person needs multiple certifications, such as SLED - a concealed weapons training course. This can cost up to \$300.00. If hired, a person might earn \$9 - \$10 an hour.
 - Several participants shared their beliefs that companies need to offer support for employees to continue their education and training. Relevant supports may include money, time off, or on-the-job training. These participants also shared two examples of companies that pay for employees to attend school and offer an in-house training program.

- One participant raised the issue that some companies do not share available advancement opportunities with all employees. For example, the human resources representative fails to inform employees that the company will pay them to take a class that will help them move up the career ladder.
- **Different Job Application Requirements:** Several participants explained that job applicants now have to apply for positions online. These participants added that the application process requires more than in the past, such as behavioral (e.g., what would you do in a certain situation?) and skills (e.g., math) testing.

Criminal Background

- **Limited Opportunity for a Second Chance:** With regard to criminal background, there was general consensus that a person's criminal background follows them for the rest of his or her life. Several participants shared that federal employers can look back 5, 10, even 15 years ago when conducting a criminal background check, and private employers can look at a person's "whole" life.
 - A few participants mentioned that they considered the criminal record criterion for hiring to be discriminatory since it offers "no second chance". These participants also spoke about how some applicants might be perceived as criminals due to stereotypes about appearance.
- **More than a workforce problem:** Participants agreed that many people have a criminal record. Several participants mentioned that a criminal record does more than prevent a person from getting a job. It can keep them from voting and living in certain locations.
- **Few Employers Hire:** In both campus groups, many participants were very engaged and eager to share their sentiments about employers' hiring policies related to criminal background. Given the nature of this discussion, participants were more likely to add to the comments rather than offer any dissent.
 - Most participants expressed uncertainty about which companies hire applicants with a criminal background.
 - A few participants reported the existence of an online list of Georgia employers who hire applicants with a criminal background.
 - Several participants emphasized the point that employers who hire applicants with a criminal background only offer "dead end jobs". "All of the fast restaurants require you to have a GED or high school diploma and a clean criminal background check or you will not get hired."
 - Multiple participants discussed how companies use temporary staffing services to hire applicants with a criminal record, which offer no benefits and "contract" of employment.
 - Some participants also explained that the barrier to employment varies based on the charge (e.g., violent charge, drugs). For example, an employer might not hire a person with a violent charge. A few participants agreed that this condition was reasonable for certain jobs, such as working with children.
 - A few participants shared that some companies hire applicants with a criminal background because they might receive a tax cut or incentive.

- There was some consensus among participants that if a person with a criminal record is hired, "they have to work harder" or "prove him- or herself."

Drug Use

In this discussion, participants generally agreed that the impact of drug use in the workplace, such as absenteeism and risks to safety. Several participants recognized that a company makes an investment when they hire an employee and that drug use increases a company’s liability. When asked about the companies that do not test for drug use, a few participants responded that those companies usually offer “dead end jobs” that have a person “living from paycheck to paycheck” (e.g., fast food or lawn care).

Transportation

There was general consensus among participants that someone without a driver’s license and a reliable vehicle is challenged to get to and from work. Also, for those who use public transportation, the Chatham Area Transit is adequate in Savannah despite the longer wait time in recent years. For those who live outside of Savannah (e.g., Pooler and Rincon), public transportation is not an option.

Overcoming Challenges

Participants rated the difficulty associated with overcoming challenges on a scale of one (not difficult) to five (very difficult). The rated challenges included education and training, criminal background, transportation, and drug use. According to participants, drug use and transportation are less difficult to overcome than criminal background and limited education and training. Participants generally agreed that supports, such as family members willing to share a car or friends who offer rides, can ease transportation challenges, although some participants offered determination and a “no excuses” attitude as the way to lessen the impact of this challenge on their lives.

Overwhelmingly, participants rated criminal background as highly difficult to overcome due to employers’ perceptions, preconceived notions, and lack of comfort with people who have a criminal background. Still, many participants’ suggested that perseverance and determination made it possible to succeed despite this barrier.

Table 8 | Difficulty Ratings for Overcoming Challenges to Meaningful Work

	Criminal Background (N=12)	Drug Use (N=12)	Transportation (N=12)	Education and Training (N=11)
Mean (Standard Deviation)	4.57(0.90)	2.50 (1.31)	2.83 (1.40)	3.65 (0.92)

Conclusions

Participants in the campus focus groups were enrolled in the Accelerating Opportunity welding and the Fast Track GED programs. Differences among program participants emerged as they described meaningful work with respect to career aspirations (e.g., welder, aircraft technician, and business owner) and reasons for career pursuits (e.g., provide for their families, help people, and travel). As expected, most participants in the Accelerated Opportunity program listed welding as an ideal job because they believed the occupation to be in demand and pay a high salary. Almost half of the participants considered working as a welder after they learned about the Accelerated Opportunity welding program. The Fast Track participants identified a variety of ideal jobs ranging from firefighter to

patient technician to diesel mechanic. In addition to providing for family, participants cited helping people and career advancement as reasons for seeking their ideal jobs.

Both groups articulated clear, chronological paths toward their ideal jobs. For the earlier steps, most participants emphasized educational milestones (e.g., obtain GED certificate or enroll in college) with increased mention of work experience or business startup (e.g. secure funding) milestones in later steps. The welding participants began to include milestones related to work experience at step two, earlier than participants in the Fast Track and community groups. Welding participants simultaneously pursue their GED certificate and welding certificate or degree. Enrollment in career-related classes might heighten the immediacy of employment for the welding participants and encourage them to prioritize working experiences earlier in their paths toward their ideal jobs.

For each step in their articulated path, participants in both programs maintained a high level of confidence that they will achieve success. When considering the likelihood for achievement of their ideal job in one, three, and five years, they tempered their confidence early because of uncertainty due to an unpredictable economy or workforce demand, potential life changes, or the significance of accomplishing their first educational milestone. When asked to consider the likelihood of achieving their ideal job in three years, participants increased their confidence. They maintained this high level of confidence when considering the likelihood that they will achieve their ideal job or career by year five. Similar to the community groups, this increased confidence might be attributed to participants' perceived significance and immediacy of the first educational milestone or they might find it difficult to imagine future challenges. Additionally, participants in the campus groups may also consider themselves further along on their articulated career path, given the expectation that they will achieve their GED certificate in three to six months or their current enrollment in job-related classes. These current and soon-to-be accomplished milestones might have motivated higher levels of confidence when predicting success.

Both groups of participants demonstrated some awareness about educational, social, and financial supports beyond their personal networks. With prompting, the participants were able to brainstorm a notable list of programmatic supports. However, many participants did inquire several times about how they were supposed to know this information. In addition, both groups of participants desired the most support for completing their GED and finding work experiences. Financial aid in the form of grants, scholarships, or stipends for childcare and transportation was also requested.

Finally, participants ranked education and training, criminal background, drug use, and transportation as the top challenges most people might face when pursuing their ideal jobs. While participants remained confident and determined to achieve, their high ratings of difficulty for criminal background and education and training underscored these challenges as significant barriers to meaningful employment.

SMALL BUSINESSES

Ideal Candidates for Entry-level Positions

To better understand the employment needs of the small business community, participants identified entry-level positions within their business. The positions cited included construction laborer, administrative support (e.g., clerical or reception), home caregiver, plant worker, medical assistant, production technician (remediation), general service technician (auto repair), sales associate, and networking technician.

In addition, participants reflected upon their *ideal* candidate for the position and answered the following questions:

- What skills and experiences should he or she have? Why?
- What characteristics does he or she have that indicates his or her potential to advance within your organization?

As each participant shared his or her responses to the above questions, the facilitator prompted for clarification or elaboration, if necessary. While some participants offered comment on shared ideas, the round-robin style of this initial discussion engendered a generally equitable conversation.

Skills and Experiences

In sum, participants generated 72 examples of skills and experiences to illustrate the ideal candidate for their businesses. (See Table 9.) Regardless of the position or industry, “soft skills” were mentioned more often than specific job-related education, skills or experiences. The key points are summarized:

- **Personality qualities:** Almost all participants conflated characteristics with skills and experiences. In essence, most participants desired employees who are dependable, respectful, personally accountable, and maintain a positive attitude. There was consensus among participants that employees who possess these qualities, in addition to existing or future job-related skills, are good for business. Specifically, these employees benefit business operations (e.g., complete assigned job responsibilities), enhance customer relations (e.g., help clients to feel welcome), and support teamwork (e.g., communicate challenges in a timely manner).
- **Communication:** Participants generally agreed that job seekers must speak correct English, listen well, and adapt communications to different audiences (e.g., across generations and non-technical customers). Several participants also emphasized the ability to write in a clear and cohesive manner for a range of business communications from emails and letters to proposals. Also, one participant mentioned that writing deficiencies were not limited to entry-level employees, but have also been observed among professional staff members.
- **Education and experience:** While “soft skills” were prioritized, several participants mentioned that they still expected competence in reading and math. A few participants wanted applicants to have a completed course of study (e.g., diploma, certificate or degree) in order to demonstrate follow-through and a steady work history, and to show evidence of commitment and attendance. It is important to note that many participants agreed they could, and are willing to train job-specific skills.
- **Problem solving or task management:** Most participants agreed that entry-level employees need to learn quickly, follow instructions, work independently, and use common sense to make decisions and figure out solutions. Several participants, particularly those who described

administrative positions, required the additional abilities. These entry-level employees must be apt to manage multiple tasks while addressing interruptions and adapting to shifting priorities.

Table 9 | Desired Skills and Experiences for Entry-level Positions in Small Businesses

Desired Skills and Experiences <i>“soft skills” in italics</i>	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of responses (%)
<i>Personality qualities (e.g., respectful, personable)</i>	16	22.2%
<i>Communication (e.g., use correct grammar)</i>	12	16.7%
Job-related skills and experience (e.g., construction knowledge, 1-2 years experience working on business networks)	9	12.5%
General skills, education, and experience (e.g., math, reading)	7	9.7%
<i>Problem solving and task management skills (e.g., work independently, follow instructions)</i>	6	8.33%
<i>Professionalism (e.g., appearance, drug free)</i>	6	8.33%
Office experience and computer skills	5	6.94%
<i>Teamwork (e.g., ability to work and communicate with a team)</i>	4	5.6%
Understanding the "big picture" (e.g., understanding how one’s position affects others)	3	4.2%
Physical activity	2	2.8%
Passion (e.g., enjoy job)	2	2.8%

Characteristics for Advancement within Company

As mentioned above, many participants are willing to invest time and money in the training and development of employees. These participants have identified a set of characteristics that indicate an employee’s potential to advance within the organization. When prompted, participants in the small business focus group generated 51 examples. (See Table 10.) The top three categories, personality qualities, communication skills, and problem solving and task management skills, were repeated and have been described in the previous section. Participants’ discussion of additional characteristics related to professional advancement are summarized:

- ***Vested interest in company:*** Several participants explained that employees with the potential for advancement seek knowledge of the industry, display a sense of pride for the company, and work as if he or she has a vested interest in the company. In addition, some participants shared that employees positioned for advancement also quickly learn the systems and procedures of an organization, complete their tasks in a timely manner, and understand how their position affects others and the success of the company.
- ***Willingness to learn:*** There was general agreement among participants that employees must be ambitious and committed to their growth – professionally and personally. Some participants

noted that employees must possess the desire to learn knowledge and skills relevant to the profession, and also identify what is needed for them to progress and advance.

- **Teamwork:** With regard to professional advancement, several participants emphasized that employees must demonstrate their ability to collaborate with other employees. Some discussed the notion of teamwork in two ways: (1) Employees must be able to effectively communicate with colleagues when working together on a project, such as simultaneously performing multiple repairs a vehicle. (2) When working in small-business setting, employees must be willing to “pitch in” where necessary and frequently contribute to the team.

Table 10 | Characteristics that Indicate the Potential to Advance in Small Businesses

Characteristics for Advancement <i>“soft skills” in italics</i>	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of Responses (%)
<i>Personality qualities (e.g., integrity, drive)</i>	21	41.2%
<i>Communication (e.g., speak and write clearly)</i>	8	15.7%
<i>Problem solving and task management abilities (e.g., set goals)</i>	7	13.7%
Vested interest in company (e.g., relates to company culture)	4	7.8%
<i>Professionalism (e.g., “be present with no drama”)</i>	4	7.8%
Willingness to learn	4	7.8%
<i>Teamwork (e.g., frequent contributions to team)</i>	3	5.9%

Confidence about Hiring Ideal Candidate

After participants shared the experiences, skills, and characteristics desired of their ideal candidate, the facilitator inquired about whether participants have ever hired their ideal candidate. Participants also rated their (a) confidence about their ability to hire an ideal candidate and (b) perceived difficulty associated with hiring an ideal candidate.

Each participant displayed a card with the number that reflected his or her confidence and difficulty ratings. Both rating scales ranged from one (not confident or not difficult) to five (very confident or very difficult). To foster discussion, the facilitator quickly reviewed each participant’s rating and elicited explanations from participants (a) with a rating similar to most of the group, (b) with a rating different from most of the group, or (c) who need additional opportunities to contribute to the discussion. These elicitations represent a sample of participants’ reasons, and not a consensus unless otherwise noted.

All participants reported to have hired their ideal candidate in the past. On average, participants reported to maintain some confidence (mean: 3.58, standard deviation: 1.00) that they are able to hire their ideal candidate. Many acknowledged that it takes time and a little bit of luck, and that often the ideal candidate approaches them first. Some of the participants who reported lower confidence ratings (a) explained that they have limited time to hire candidates or (b) have “come to terms” with the fact that they will hire an applicant that is less than ideal. A few participants reported that they offer a rigorous training process to close the gap between the skills and experiences they desire and a new employee’s existing skills and experiences.

On average, participants perceived the difficulty associated with hiring an ideal candidate as low (mean: 2.25, standard deviation: 1.36). For companies required to hire many employees, participants reported a higher level of difficulty. Most participants hire employees directly or via a human resources representative, but some participants mentioned that they have outsourced their hiring to staffing agencies. These participants shared mixed experiences. For example, the quality of temporary employees seemed to be dependent on the diligence and workload of the staffing recruiter.

Several participants also shared several hiring strategies that have proven successful for their businesses. One participant explained that her company has a strong referral system among current employees. A few participants also described extensive interview processes where applicants (a) interview with several or all team members for at least half a day or (b) participate in a trial work period with current employees for a few hours.

Hiring Challenges

Participants discussed hiring challenges in two ways:

1. **Generated Hiring Challenges:** Participants generated common challenges for new employees in entry-level positions, by writing responses to the prompts: “*My new hire usually struggles to . . .*” and “*My new hire usually needs more . . .*” After the participants posted their written responses on the wall, the facilitator selected a few participants to clarify or elaborate on some of challenges.
2. **Ranked Hiring Challenges:** From a set of research-based challenges that emerged from the literature review for this study, participants ranked the top three hiring challenges for their businesses. In each group, participants discussed two of the top challenges. The facilitator aimed to acknowledge all ideas shared, and recorded the main points of each idea on chart paper that was visible to all participants. Before transitioning to the next discussion topic, the facilitator confirmed with participants that everyone’s ideas were listed on the chart paper and represented accurately. The reported themes recount the full discussion. Consensus among participants is noted where applicable.

Generated Hiring Challenges

In total, participants generated 32 hiring challenges. (See Table 11.) The discussion of these challenges centered on process and productivity.

- **Process:** Several participants described how new employees struggled to quickly learn the processes and procedures of their organization. Some of these participants explained that these process skills required employees to listen and follow directions, and to recognize the utility of standardized work systems. Participants generally agreed there exists the expectation that the employees will gradually learn these processes, and begin to work independently within a few months of hire.
- **Productivity:** Some participants reported that new employees often struggled to accomplish their work responsibilities in a timely manner. For example, some employees seem to work without regard to “billable” time and the customer’s expectation that quality work would be performed in an efficient manner. Also, a few participants mentioned that newer employees seem to be more time-oriented rather than task-oriented (i.e., they consider work done because it is the close of business instead of the completion of a task or project).

Please note that one participant submitted only positive responses related to new employees wanting to work more hours and spend additional time at the office. These were not included in the generated hiring challenges reported in Table 11.

Table 11 | Struggles or Needs among New Employee in Small Businesses (generated)

Struggles or Needs for New Hires	Number of responses (#)	Percentage of responses (%)
Knowledge of “the business” (and their role within)	9	28.1%
Job-related training and skills	5	15.6%
Problem solving and work management abilities	5	15.6%
Personality qualities	5	15.6%
Desire to learn or improve	4	12.5%
Ability to adapt to different environments	2	6.3%
Communication and professionalism	2	6.3%

Ranked Hiring Challenges

In both focus groups, participants ranked education and training and home life as the top two hiring challenges for small businesses. (See Table 12 for rankings.)

Table 12 | Hiring Challenges for Small Businesses (ranked)

Challenges *	Number of votes (#)	Percentage of votes (%)
Education or training	9	24.3%
Home life	7	18.9%
Criminal background	5	13.5%
Transportation	5	13.5%
Job-seeking costs	3	8.1%
Child care	3	8.1%
Health	2	5.4%
Drug use	2	5.4%
Discrimination	1	2.7%
Disability	0	0%

* Challenges in bold were discussed after participants ranked their top three.

Education and Training

- **Education is not enough. More real-world experience is needed.**
 - Many participants contended that more real world experiences are needed in K-12 and postsecondary education. Specifically, students and future job seekers need more opportunities to collaborate in teams, participate in hands-on activities where they apply what they know and integrate constructive feedback.
 - Participants generally agreed that a certificate or degree alone was not enough for job seekers, and suggested that job seekers participate in training programs that expose them to the day-to-day happenings in the workplace. A few participants also recommended that job seekers would benefit from ongoing practice dealing with customers, working as part of team, and learning to manage and prioritize multiple tasks in a dynamic work environment.
 - When asked, several participants expressed their willingness to offer internships that can help students and job seekers gain real-world work experiences.
- **Customer service:** A few participants remarked how job seekers need opportunities to develop their client or customer service skills, which were described as an amalgam of communication, psychology, and empathy. One participant explained how job seekers should learn how to "make the customer feel better."
- **Maturity and Life Experience:** Some participants recommended that job seekers should consider finding a mentor to locate professional and personal development opportunities.
- **Military Experience:** There was some consensus when one participant shared that she valued the discipline of employees who have served in the military.
- **It always comes back to "Home Training" and "Soft Skills".** Participants generally agreed that, if job seekers have not learned manners and how to follow directions in their home, then the schools needs to teach it. A few participants added that job seekers need experiences that teach ethics and personal responsibility and noted that organizations like Junior Achievement can support this effort. Some participants also emphasized that teachers must be able to set and maintain classroom expectations that reflect societal norms.

Home Life

- **Home life spills over into the workplace:** Participants agreed that a challenging home life (e.g., financial concerns, drug addicted family members, relationships with spouses, significant others and children, or domestic violence) hindered employees' abilities to maintain focus at work. Several participants provided examples, such as a lack of punctuality and decreased production time. One participant believed that single-parent families contributed to these home life challenges. Another participant shared that there have been recent shootings at workplaces across the state, and offered the opinion that these instances might be related to domestic violence. Also, a few participants discussed how the personal use of social media at work affects employees' moods or emotions and decreases production time. Finally, one participant noted that given these home-life challenges, many employees seem to struggle to "switch hats" or draw boundaries between their work and home lives.
- **Childcare:** A few participants shared that the lack of quality childcare affects employees at all levels.

- **Payroll Burden:** Some participants mentioned that financial obligations, related to child support or bankruptcy, often involve the garnishing of wages. Payroll "departments" at small business have to shoulder this burden.
- **Financial Literacy:** A few participants described how employees' bring stress about a lack of money (perceived or actual) into the workplace. These participants explained that this challenge is not limited to lower-wage employees, but also affects employees at higher levels due to the mismanagement of earnings (e.g., not saving enough, unnecessary 401k loans).

A Note on Criminal Background and Drug Use

During the ideal candidate discussion, a few participants briefly discussed criminal background and drug use, and emphasized that these were big challenges for them. They noted that company policies and insurance requirements necessitate a clean criminal background and driving record and no drug use for employees. Drug use and background screenings follow employers' initial review for skills and experiences, which can lead to a potential hire being disqualified. Frequently, these requirements are communicated in the job announcements, but applicants who cannot pass the screening pursue the position anyway.

Also, some discussion ensued about the impact of drug use on workforce development in Savannah, Georgia. A participant reported that the local challenges related to drug use and criminal background are greater than the rest of the state. Another participant believed these challenges to be representative of the entire state.

Overcoming Challenges

Eight participants rated their confidence on a scale of one (not confident) to five (very confident) about the ability of their businesses to overcome challenges related to home life and education and training.

With regard to home life, many participants reported a lack of confidence (mean: 2.63, standard deviation: 1.41) about overcoming this challenge. Many considered an employee's home life out of their control. However, several participants expressed that one benefit of being a small business is that they can also invest in the personal development of an employee through setting and meeting goals, fiscal education, or mentoring. This investment can help overcome some aspects of the home life challenge.

Participants reported more confidence (mean: 3.57, standard deviation: 1.04) about overcoming the challenges related to education and training. Many agreed that their companies could fill the gap through training, mentorship, and a company culture of accountability and teamwork.

Conclusions

Participants in the small-business focus groups represented multiple industries and considered a broad range of entry-level positions. However, their discussions converged on several key skills and experiences needed for entry-level employees to thrive in their companies. Participants prioritized "soft skills": (a) personality qualities (e.g., dependability), (b) professionalism (e.g., time management and regular attendance), (c) problem solving and task management skills (e.g., work independently and follow procedures), and (d) communication skills (e.g., correct grammar, write clearly and concisely, and adapt message for different audiences).

General skills, such as reading and math, were desired, but most participants were willing to train entry-level employees in job-specific skills and company procedures. Several participants also articulated that employees should demonstrate a vested interest in the company, be willing to learn about their industry, and frequently contribute to the team, in order to advance their careers within an organization.

All participants reported that they have hired their ideal candidates in the past and maintained some confidence that they can repeat this success. Participants also acknowledged that it takes time and some luck to employ an entry-level job seeker who will grow within and contribute to their company. Staffing services, employee referrals, panel interviews, and trial work sessions, emerged as hiring strategies.

Participants generated several challenges for new employees, which center on productivity (e.g., completing tasks in a timely manner) and process (e.g., learning and adhering to company protocols). They ranked education and training and home life as the top two hiring challenges. Many participants reported a lack of confidence that their businesses can overcome home-life challenges. These participants generally believe an employee's home life remains outside their control as employers. With regard to education and training, participants reported more confidence. Participants generally agree that they can mitigate both challenges through personal and professional development opportunities within their companies.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Job Seekers Need Multiple Supports to Achieve Meaningful Work

Education and Training

Across the community and campus job-seeker focus groups, participants were enrolled in GED and trade-training classes. These participants held a diverse set of ideas about meaningful work, as evidenced by their reported ideal jobs (e.g., nurse, business owner, or welder) and the reasons they shared for pursuing these occupations (e.g., provide for their families, help people, or do something they enjoy). As expected, the majority of welding participants identified welding as an ideal job. Less than half considered welding a career choice prior to learning about the Accelerating Opportunity welding program. Participants' wide-ranging career aspirations suggest the need for training opportunities in multiple fields. Programs similar to Accelerating Opportunity may help job seekers narrow their career goals.

Reasons, such as helping people and enjoying the tasks of the reported ideal job, were mentioned more often among participants in the community groups and the Fast Track class. The participants in the welding campus group cited more reasons related to providing for themselves or their families; there was consensus that welding was a high-paying, in-demand career field. Interestingly, none of the welding participants provided reasons related to their desire to perform tasks related to welding (e.g., putting things together). Given the varied reasons for career pursuits among participants, training programs might benefit from presenting customized recruitment messages. This may increase the appeal of the program, as well as help job seekers identify a career that best fits their goals, interests, and values.

Community and campus participants articulated clear, chronological paths toward their ideal jobs. Most paths emphasized educational milestones, such as attaining a GED certificate or earning a degree. Compared to the other groups, the welding participants reported more milestones related to work experience and included these milestones earlier in their paths. The dual pursuit of a GED certificate and a trade degree may compel job seekers to prioritize work experiences earlier in their path toward their ideal job. Vocational programs offered at Woodville Tompkins Technical High School might also support similar career planning because students are simultaneously pursuing a high school diploma and training for a career.

On average, community and campus participants reported increased confidence when they predicated the likelihood of achieving their ideal jobs in three and five years. Participants might (a) perceive their current educational efforts as the most daunting challenges due to immediacy or limited success in previous educational experiences or (b) experience difficulty imagining future challenges related to their ideal careers. Given this, participants could benefit from academic and career advising that helps them realistically anticipate challenges beyond their current situation.

Broad-based Support Services

During all job-seeker focus groups, participants identified several significant challenges to achieving their ideal jobs, such as the cost of education and training, criminal background, discrimination, childcare, and transportation. While both groups generated a substantial list of existing and desired supports, the community participants discussed a broader set of services. These participants were notably more aware of community-based and nonprofit organizations that offered services related to education and training (e.g., free CDL classes), social supports (e.g., home ownership guidance), and financial assistance (e.g., tax support). This is likely attributed to the fact that their GED courses are embedded in

community centers that offer or refer these services. Campus job seekers may potentially benefit from increased awareness of these services via class announcements or flyers.

In addition, new and existing education and training programs should consider integrating social supports into their curriculum. Advising on available public assistance and local resources can provide basic support for job seekers while academic, career, and even personal counseling have the potential to give job seekers more personalized options for support. These types of services afford job seekers the opportunity to rely on more than sheer determination to persevere past the barriers to meaningful employment.

Job seekers should be encouraged to participate in fiscal education opportunities throughout their education and training. According to this study's demographic data, 44% of participants currently earn less than \$19,999, 31% earn less than \$34,999, and 41% receive public assistance (e.g., SNAP benefits). When jobs seekers with similar earnings secure meaningful employment, they will likely earn more money than they have before, and could benefit from guidance related to budgeting, navigating employer benefits (e.g., retirement, healthcare), and home ownership.

Also, several participants shared goals of becoming a business owner. These participants mentioned building credit, saving money, and securing grants and loans as ways to fund their future business ventures. While Savannah boasts many supports for current and future entrepreneurs, personal (and future business) fiscal health is critical to the success of any venture. In addition to the above-mentioned topics, these future business owners might benefit from additional savings strategies.

Job Seeking Supports

Across the community and campus groups, participants reported a limited number of milestones related to job seeking (e.g., interviewing, resume writing) in the paths to their ideal jobs. Also, prompting was necessary to initiate discussion of job-seeking resources. Some participants mentioned St. Joseph's Candler's St. Mary's Community Center, Step Up, and their teachers as supports in helping them find a job via mock interviews, career advising, and referrals. The following list offers recommendations to further support job seekers:

- ***Participate in networking activities.*** Several participants expressed frustration with "It's not what you know, but who you know." While this hiring practice might be perceived as unfair, word of mouth referrals play a key role in securing employment.
 - Job seekers should pursue opportunities that expand their social circles and create connections with people who already work jobs they desire or are employed with companies that offer relevant positions or career paths. These new connections could be professional acquaintances or mentors. Both would benefit job seekers.
 - In addition, job seekers might benefit from workshops that teach them how to network professionally or conduct career-related informational interviews to further support these efforts.
 - Savannah Technical College and partner organizations might consider offering events, including, but not limited to, job fairs that place job seekers in front of employers seeking applicants. While small businesses might only have a few positions available at a time, they should still be invited to meet with job seekers. These "family-like" work environments might be a better fit for many job seekers' professional and personal goals.

- **Identify "fit" with potential employers.** As job seekers learn interview skills, they should be prepared to identify which employers are likely to be a good "fit" for their personal and professional goals and values. While there was diversity among desired ideal jobs (even within a job seeker), many participants reported that they wanted to secure employment that allows them to contribute to their community, advance in a career, and learn more. Knowing which questions to ask can help job seekers better understand a company's core values, working culture, and opportunities for advancement positions which would create a more successful and sustainable relationship between themselves and the employer.
- **Showcase characteristics along with education and skills.** Participants in the small business focus groups prioritized personality characteristics (e.g., dependability and determination) and problem-solving and task management abilities (e.g., good judgment, time management and prioritization). While education and job-related skills are important, job seekers need to be able to explain how they have persevered past challenges, prioritized multiple responsibilities, and worked independently.
- **Participate in internships or apprentice opportunities to gain relevant work experience.** Many participants in the small business focus groups reported that they prefer relevant work experiences to accompany job seekers' education. Internship or apprentice opportunities afford job seekers the opportunity to apply their "book knowledge" in a fast-paced work environment with multiple and changing priorities. It also allows them to practice their professionalism (e.g., dress, communication skills, and positive attitude) and customer-service skills. As reported earlier, several small businesses are interested in offering internships opportunities.

Small Businesses Seek a “Softer” Type of Employee

Throughout the small business focus groups, participants emphasized their desire for employees to demonstrate “soft skills”, such as personality qualities, professionalism, communications skills, problem solving and task management skills. Several participants also expressed that employees who understood the “big picture” as it relates to company culture, policies, or procedures were well positioned to advance within their company. As participants discussed their desires and challenges related to hiring, many made the case that small businesses have different needs. These dynamic workplaces are often growing and are more sensitive to demand. This results in shifting priorities and necessitates a willingness and ability for employees to perform beyond his or her official job description and to frequently contribute to the team.

Participants ranked education and training and home life as a top hiring challenges. Few participants reported the confidence to overcome the home life challenge due to beliefs that they had limited ability to affect their employees’ personal lives. However, several participants did offer mentoring and personal development opportunities as potential ways to enable their employees to manage personal struggles.

On average, participants felt more confident that their businesses could overcome challenges related to education and training. To this end, many participants requested learning experiences for job seekers to address the needs of small businesses. When discussing challenges, many participants offered suggestions related to the education and training of job seekers at the K-12 and postsecondary levels. The recommendations below reflect these sentiments.

- **Foster a Desire to Learn:** The small business community is willing to extend the education of job seekers. For on-the-job training to be effective, the trainee must be coachable, i.e., willing to listen, ready to learn, and open to feedback. Early school and home experiences should spark curiosity. Learning experiences at school and in the community need to create repeated

opportunities for students to develop questions they wish to investigate, offer and receive constructive feedback, and recognize how working with others who contribute knowledge and expertise enhances thinking, services, and products.

- ***Develop Basic Business Knowledge:*** Hands-on experiences or classes that increase understanding of different business models, cash flow, operations, and key roles. This can potentially support applicants and new hires to better understand their role in relation to the success of the company, and make more relevant and compelling the expectations for standardized systems and processes.
- ***Increase Opportunities to Gain Work Experience:*** Small businesses and local educational institutions need to develop more partnerships where students can engage in intern, apprentice, or practicum experiences. It is important to note these experiences must extend beyond shadowing and neat projects that are peripheral to the company's operations. It is critical to small businesses that job seekers grow their ability to function in dynamic workplaces with competing priorities, a commitment to customer satisfaction, and requirement of personal responsibility and teamwork.

APPENDIX A (JOB SEEKERS)

Participant Demographics

Table 13 | Demographic Information for Job Seekers

	Job Seekers Community	Job Seekers Campus	Job Seekers (all)
N (Survey Respondents)	17	22	39
GENDER			
Male	5 (29%)	13 (59%)	18 (46%)
Female	12 (71%)	8 (36%)	20 (51%)
AGE			
<18	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
18 – 29	8 (47%)	9 (41%)	17 (44%)
30 – 45	3 (17.67%)	11 (50%)	14 (36%)
46 – 59	3 (17.67%)	1(5%)	4 (10%)
60+	3 (17.67%)	0	3 (8%)
RACE/ETHNICITY			
African-American	17 (100%)	14 (64%)	31 (79%)
White	0	5 (23%)	5 (13%)
Hispanic	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
African-American/Native American	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
Other	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
ANNUAL INCOME			
<\$19,999	14 (82%)	3 (14%)	17 (44%)
\$20,000-\$34,999	1 (6%)	11 (50%)	12 (31%)
\$35,000-\$49,999	1 (6%)	3 (14%)	4 (10%)
> \$75,000	0	1 (5%)	1 (3%)
Receive Public Assistance (e.g., SNAP)	11 (65%)	5 (23%)	16 (41%)

Discussion Guide (Job Seekers)

OBJECTIVE: To gain insight into the barriers (perceived and actual) to meaningful employment in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:

- participants' definitions and expectations about meaningful employment
- existing and desired supports while seeking meaningful employment
- perceptions of barriers to meaningful employment.

DISCUSSION: Participants will engage in a series of interactive discussions that use a variety of artifacts and activities to support the elicitation and sharing of participant ideas about each topic.

- *Data Collection:* The focus group will be audio recorded. All artifacts will be collected for further review.
- *Duration:* The focus group will last 2 hours.
- *Staffing:* Facilitator and Note taker

Optional sign-in & Refreshments served

Introductions - Name & Favorite Thing About Savannah

Discussion 1: Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about what meaningful employment means to them.]

Take a few moments to fill out the top part of your handout.

We will take turns sharing what we wrote.

- Question 1A | What is your ideal job? Give examples.
- Question 1B | Complete this sentence | When I work as a [1 ideal job], I can . . .
- Question 1C | On a scale of 1 (not confident) to 5 (super confident), how confident do you feel that you will achieve your ideal job in 1 | 3 | or 5 years?
Question 1D | Who would like to share why they selected their number?

Discussion 2: The Path to Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas what it requires to attain meaningful employment.]

- Question 2A | What are the steps do you need to take to achieve your ideal job?
- Question 2B | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident are you that you will achieve step 1 | 2 | 3?
- Question 2C | Who would like to share their step why they selected their number?

Discussion 3: Supports on Your Path to Your Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' experiences about how they are supported to achieve their ideal job.]

- Question 3A | Who helps you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
- Question 3B | What programs help you on your path to achieve your ideal job? How?
 - Are there any programs that:
 - Prepare you to apply for a specific job
 - Help you obtain a certificate
 - Train you on specific skills
 - Put you in front of employers
- Question 3C | Which steps do you receive or expect to receive the most support? How?

Discussion 4: Challenges to Achieve an Ideal Job

[Rationale | To elicit participants' perceptions of challenges that most people face when seeking meaningful employment.]

- Questions 4A | What are the top three (3) challenges most people face on the path to ideal job?

The top two (2) challenges (per participant vote) are used in this following discussion:

- Question 4B | Why do so many people face [Challenge 1 | 2]?
- Question 4C | On a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult is it for most people to overcome [Challenge 1 | 2]?
- Question 4D | Who would like to share their step why they selected their number?
- Question 4E | What do most people need to overcome [Challenge 1 | 2]?

Closing Activity: Your Next Step

(If time, open up for additional questions or comments from participants)

APPENDIX B (SMALL BUSINESSES)

Discussion Guide (Small Businesses)

OBJECTIVE: To gain insight into how small businesses perceives the applicant pool for potential employees in Savannah, Georgia. Specifically, we seek to learn about:

- requisite qualifications and characteristics for entry-level positions in a professional environment
- perceived and actual challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees
- existing and desired resources needed to overcome these challenges.

Definition communicated to small business owners: The specific focus is on entry-level positions that require a high school or GED diploma, technical or associates degree, or certifications and licensures. Such positions might include administrative assistants (e.g., receptionist or data entry), sales staff, paraprofessionals, craft or construction laborers, or machine operators.

DISCUSSION: Participants will engage in a series of interactive discussions that use a variety of artifacts and activities to support the elicitation and sharing of participant ideas about each topic.

- *Data Collection:* The focus group will be audio recorded. All artifacts will be collected for further review.
- *Duration:* The focus group will last 2 hours.
- *Staffing:* Facilitator and Note taker

Sign-in and Refreshments served

Introductions: Name and description of business

Discussion 1: Your Ideal candidate

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about their ideal candidate and requisite qualifications.]

- Question 1A | Name a professional *entry-level* position in your organization. Describe your ideal candidate.
Question 1B | What skills and experiences should he or she have? Why?
(prompt for “soft” skills)
Question 1C | What characteristics does he or she have that indicates his or her potential to advance within your organization?
- Question 2A | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel that you will hire this candidate?
Question 2B | Why did you select this number?
Question 2C | Have you ever hired your ideal candidate before for a similar position?
Question 2D | On a scale of 1 to 5, how difficult was it to find this candidate?
Question 2E | Why did you select this number?

Discussion 2: Challenges to Hiring Your Ideal Applicant

[Rationale | To elicit participants' ideas about (1) challenges to attracting, hiring, and retaining entry-level employees and (2) resources they need to overcome these challenges.]

- Question 1A | Think about your applicant pool. What keeps you from hiring your ideal candidate?
Question 1B | Prompt with sentence starters:
 - The applicants usually needs more . . .
 - The applicants struggle to . . .

- Question 1C | Research has shown that these are challenges to employment for many applicants. From this list, what are the 3 top hiring challenges?

The top two (2) challenges (per participant vote) are used in this following discussion:

- Question 2A | Why do think this [Challenge 1 |2] exists in Savannah?
- Question 2B | On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel that your business can overcome [Challenge 1 |2]?
 - Question 2C | Why did you select this number?
- Question 2D | What needs to happen so that you will have more applicants who don't face or overcome this [challenge]?

(If time, open up for additional questions or comments from participants)