INITIAL REPORT APRIL 14, 2020

# Assessing Gaps in the System:

## Girls' Careers and Transition to Adulthood

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## PART I: Executive Summary

*Are young women prepared with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to succeed in the workforce, post-secondary education, and to contribute positively in their communities?*

*Assessing Gaps in the System: Girls' Careers and Transition to Adulthood* investigates the opportunities and challenges young women face in their transition to adulthood. As part of an initial community inquiry initiated by Women Empowering Women, this study seeks to understand the resources, opportunities, networks of support, and experiences available to young women in southwestern North Dakota. These data intend to identify gaps in young women's preparation and serve as the foundation for recommendations intended to help alleviate

## Report Overview

**PART I** includes the executive summary, a summary of key findings, and a table of contents.

**PART II** describes the community and provides an overview of the methodological approach.

**PART III** summarizes findings by exploring the major themes that arose in the context of interviews. In this section, I highlight participants' response to key interview questions, while analyzing the way in which concepts like **class**, **gender** and **mental health** emerge as salient topics.

**PART IV** considers the next steps in this project.

structural and systemic barriers that stymie young women's economic, educational, and social success.

This report summarizes major findings from *Assessing Gaps in the System's* initial inquiry, which focuses on adult perspectives. This preliminary investigation engages with a diverse cross-section of adults in Stark County, North Dakota as a means by which to assess how adults perceive young women's transitions to adulthood. Comprehensive, one-on-one interviews with 11 adults in February 2020 provide the data in this report. All but one of these participants work directly or indirectly with youth in Dickinson, through the public school system, community organizations, or within the homeschooling community. In this report, participants share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they relate to the school system; what they recognize as the opportunities and challenges for young women in southwestern North Dakota; and young women's readiness for life after high school graduation. Their stories provide an overview of the 'system,' and identify gaps in young women's preparedness.

# Summary of Major Findings

*What are some of the "gaps"?*

1

## UNDER-RESOURCED

Adult 'insiders' perceive the Dickinson Public School System as **under-resourced**. Schools are over-crowded and **lack adequate numbers of mental-health professionals and social workers**. In part, the transitory nature of the community creates and exacerbates these issues.

2

## CAREER ACADEMY

The career academy model is controversial but likely to be implemented at DHS over the upcoming years. While all respondents emphasize the value of experiential learning, they do not critically consider the ways in which the **academy model may reproduce systems and outcome that disadvantage young women.**

3

## GENDER MATTERS

Adults believe that **gender** continues to shape the perception of an actual opportunities and challenges that young people face in southwestern ND. This manifests in **mental health issues, technology use, occupational gender segregation, and vulnerability to gender-based risks**.

4

## READINESS

Young women are academically well-prepared but they are not fully equipped for adult-responsibilities that would enable them to independently lead full, healthy lives. Adults stress that **youth would benefit from training in "life-skills" courses that cover personal finance, critical-thinking, and decision-making skills**.

5

## FAMILIES AS FOUNDATIONAL

While adults believe that school is influential, they emphasize that **families provide the foundation that creates resilience in youth** or that produces risk factors that youth need to overcome.

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# PART II: Context, Sample, and Methods

## Community Context and Sample

In the initial inquiry put forth in *Assessing the Gaps*, I conducted 11 in-depth, one-on-one interviews with adults in Stark County during February of 2020. Interviews range from just over one-hour to almost three-hours in length, for a total of 1,075 minutes of audio recordings. Participants were enthusiastic and generous with their time and thoughts, making the average interview 97 minutes long. In this report, I discuss the general characteristics and roles of each participant; however, any information that could potentially identify a participant (including their name, exact age, or specific information about their job) is not included in this report or has been modified to protect participants' confidentiality. I use pseudonyms but everyone in this report is real and I strive to accurately represent their thoughts and ideas through direct quotes and summaries.

### *Community*

Stark County is located in southwest North Dakota. Dickinson, the largest city in the county, falls just south of the Bakken Formation, one of the largest oil developments in the United States. An oil boom—which began in 2006 and peaked in 2012—has since stabilized, though the oil and gas industry continues to drive the local economy and provide the highest-paying jobs in the region.[1] The population of Stark County, estimated at just over 30,000, is predominantly white (88.6%) with a median age of 34. The median household income is $77,329, and eight percent of the population lives below the poverty line (with females, aged 18-24, the largest demographic living in poverty).[2]

### *Sampling*

This pilot employed convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-random methodology that recruits from an accessible, relevant population; snowball sampling relies upon recruitment recommendations from participants (thus, the sample grows like a rolling "snowball"). Initially, potential participants were recruited based on their occupation. I identified potential recruits who worked within the Dickinson Public School System, Trinity Catholic Schools, and the homeschooling community. Eventually, I expanded the target sample to include community

[1] The second largest industry is the health care and social assistance sector, followed by the retail sector.

[2] United States Census Bureau. 2018. *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.* Retrieved from: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/

organizations that work with youth. I targeted individuals with administrative roles, policy-based roles, and directly support youth through education or services. I "cold-called" or "cold-emailed" individuals. In this initial outreach I introduced myself, provided a brief overview of the study, and asked if they would be willing to meet for a confidential, one-on-one interview. At the conclusion of the first five interviews, I asked participants who they thought I should interview. Based on their recommendations, I reached out to those individuals (after five interviews, we had met recruitment goals!).

### *Sample*

The seven women and four men who create this sample range in age from their late 20s to late 50s. All are estimated to be middle class (an estimate based on their levels of education, their current jobs, and their appearance); and all but one identify as white. Four participants do not have children and seven are not originally from North Dakota. All but one of these adults work with youth, either within or outside of the school system. Some of these individuals occupy administrative roles, others are educators, and still others are community partners who offer resources or shape policies that directly influence youth. Represented in this sample are people with high-level decision-making roles; individuals who sit on boards and steering- or policy-making committees; people who support students with emotional or behavioral issues and/or who have been victimized; and those who spend time in the classroom.

"**Table 1: Participant Demographic Information**" provides a demographic sketch of these participants. Participants' roles are described as direct (they have direct contact with students in some capacity) or administrative (their primary duties are administrative or managerial in nature) and located within the education system and/or within in the community. One female respondent in her late-20s represents an 'outside' perspective—she is not involved in the school system, she does not work with youth in the community, she does not have children, and she lived outside of North Dakota for most of her life.

**Table 1: Participant Demographic Information**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Race | Class | Kids | Role Description | From ND? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ashlynn | F | 40s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Direct) | Yes |
| Aaron | M | 40s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Admin.) | No |
| Margery | F | 50s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Direct) | Yes |
| Bethany | F | 30s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Direct) | No |
| Elise | F | 30s | White | Middle Class | No | Education/Comm. (Direct) | No |
| Mariah | F | 40s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education/Comm. (Direct) | Yes |
| Teresa | F | 40s | Mixed Race | Middle Class | No | Community (Direct) | No |
| Sonja | F | 20s | White | Middle Class | No | "Outsider" | No |
| Tommy | M | 50s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Direct) | Yes |
| David | M | 50s | White | Middle Class | Yes | Education (Admin.) | No |
| Andrew | M | 30s | White | Middle Class | No | Community (Direct) | No |

## Methods

This project follows an inductive, qualitative methodology. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) asks adults a range of questions designed to elicit their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.[3] Questions in this protocol enable participants to direct the interview—to some degree—to topics they find most important about youth experiences. The interview protocol consists of four substantive sections that probe the following: (1) the participant's background and biography; (2) their understanding of the school system; (3) contemporary issues facing youth; (4) their perception of young women's readiness and current programs that offer opportunities to youth; and (5) any additional comments on the challenges and opportunities facing young women in the community.

Participants' stories and responses to interview questions represent data. As I collected and reviewed these data, I gave particular attention to repeated ideas, concepts, or patterns of speech to

[3] Face-to-face, in-person interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choosing—often a coffee shop or their office. For scheduling reasons, two interviews took place over Zoom. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded; later, these interviews were transcribed and coded thematically in Atlas.TI with 41 codes. In addition, I documented the interview setting, participant characteristics, non-audible expressions, and emergent themes in and immediately after each interview. I paid for interviewees' meals or drinks if we met in a public location; participants were not otherwise compensated for their time.

formulate "codes." These codes represent tags identifying thematic and specific data points, and which can be grouped into larger concepts or categories. Following a thematic analytic approach, which aims to reveal the roots of underlying ideas in participants' accounts,[4] I began with broad codes before developing more specific codes. In doing so, I sought to better understand participants constructions of gendered opportunities and challenges in southwestern North Dakota. Eventually, the categories developed from these codes form the basis of the findings reported below and inform my analysis.

Participants' data do not constitute the "Truth" but rather represent what participants, themselves, identify and deem important. These accounts reveal "insider" thinking and display how adult's understand young women's experiences in the community. Given that 10 of these individuals work with youth—providing education, shaping policies, or offering community services—these perspectives provide valuable insights and help us to understand how and why adults guide young women.

## Limitations

A qualitative approach to research allows the revelation of complexity, context, and richness. In-depth interviews grant intimate access to quiet spaces and truths that otherwise remain unheard. Unlike quantitative approaches which identify generalizable trends and pursue statistical significance, qualitative methodologies seek to open the 'black box' to explain processes: the how's and why's that lie beneath the surface. This report rests upon a small, non-representative sample that does not lend itself to statistical significance because representativeness is not the goal in evaluating specific contexts. Instead, these data help to illuminate how people think about important issues in the region (and why these issues are important to them). For example, in the 2019 *Community Health Needs Assessment* survey results from 236 community members in the Dickinson service area reveal that the top three community health concerns are youth drug use and abuse; youth alcohol use and abuse; and the availability of mental health services.[5] This prior work helps to provide a outline of the community, whereas *Assessing the Gaps* contributes more detail by probing

[4] Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77-101.

[5] Howe, Melana. 2019. *Community Health Needs Assessment: Dickinson Service Area, North Dakota.* Grand Forks, ND: Center for Rural Health, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

*how* people 'see' these issues, *why* they occur, and *why* they matter to people. In this way, the findings present in this report offer a useful lens through which to view the community; inferences about the population at large, should be left to the work of quantitative endeavors.

This initial inquiry is largely a "pilot" phase in a larger research project. Interviews in this phase help shape a strong interview protocol for other participants and directions for future research. In this sample, representation from Trinity Catholic Schools (TCS) is notably absent. Due to the busy time of year, staff from Trinity did not respond to interview requests. This absence is important, not only because TCS serve a significant number of youth in the community, but also because the issues within TCS may take a distinctly different form than those within the public school system. Including a TCS perspective (and additional participants from the homeschooling community) represents a productive avenue for future research.

As qualitative interviews unfold in real-time they can take unexpected directions. While this flexibility provides rich insights and highlights surprising concepts, it also means that each interview is different. Due to time constraints, some interviews concluded before I could pose each question on the protocol. Other times, I skipped interview questions that did not apply to a participant. These judgement calls were my best attempts to conduct interviews in a manner that was respectful of participants and may also represent a limitation of the data.

The findings in this report build a foundation for and frame the overall research agenda for *Assessing Gaps in the System*. These interviews represent a valuable *part* of an overall inquiry and these findings provide helpful insights to inform future research and action.

# PART III: Findings

## The School System

> "Out here, we've always had less resources—ok, here's my bias—than the east. The eastern part of the state seems to have a little bit more access to resources than we do out here. So we always operated with less, with a less-mentality. We have less. And we all recognize that for us all to be successful and to provide the best support for families, for youth, for adults, is really for us to work together."
> -Margery

### Major Challenges: An Overview

In interviews, participants discuss challenges within the educational system in southwestern North Dakota as well as the challenges they perceive young women face. In this section, I discuss the systemic challenges identified by participants (later in the report I discuss the challenges faced by young women and youth).

As a whole, participants see the education system in southwestern North Dakota as under-resourced (this includes both the Dickinson Public School System (DPSS) and the homeschooling community). For DPSS, the three primary, interrelated issues participants identify include: **(1)** a lack of sufficient physical space and infrastructure which leads to significant overcrowding in the classrooms; **(2)** staffing shortages, particularly a lack of mental health care professionals; and **(3)** the transience of the student body. I first discuss these issues in detail, before turning to a discussion of the challenges of the homeschooling community.

#### *Lack of Space, Behavioral Issues, and the Success Academy*

Each of the participants who works *within* the DPSS, indicates that overcrowding is the single most important issue that Dickinson High School (DHS) faces. Participants highlight that DHS lacks sufficient space to serve its student body, leading to an increase in behavioral issues. Ashlynn reports: "right now, it's just space. Space is the number one issue…I honestly think that's where the behavior problems are coming from—when they are stacked on top of each other." She goes on to

explain that not only does space scarcity increase students' stress and tension, but that it is detrimental to their education: "grading 35 papers in an English classroom, you're not going to get your paper back and effectively make changes and then get it edited again. It's a numbers issue and a space issue…it's just a vicious circle." Aaron echos these comments, "they cite studies on this… discipline problems go up when you have overcrowding. Kids being able to focus is an issues. In some studies, even overall morale!"

Aaron pulls out the results of a recent survey, completed by 665 students at DHS about their classroom experience:

> *I carry this around because it's so horrible…So the questions ask—and this was in October —"During the last five school days, in class, has another student- " and you had to mark one. It says: "talked loudly, yelled, or made noises that interfered with your schoolwork." Sixty-six percent said in the last five days that had happened. It says, "During the last five school days, in class, has another student refused to cooperate or follow the instructions of a teacher?" 63.3% said yes. One of them was, "threatened you or someone in class with a weapon." Ten percent in five days! I mean, this is Dickinson High School. That's astonishing.*

For individuals within the DPSS, a partial answer to these behavioral issues is the Success Academy, an off-site educational program for youth with repetitive behavioral issues. Ashlynn explains that the Success Academy—which just opened in February 2020—is "one-thousand percent needed." She continues, "the Success Academy came when we realized that 35% of the problems, actually it was 39 I think, were from five kids. And if we could remove those five kids from the system, *they* could be more successful *and* the other 25 or 30 kids in the class are going to be more successful." Participants explain that administrators within the school recommend students for enrollment in the Success Academy. Enrollment is voluntary and, at the time of my interview with David, it was near capacity with 8 out of the 10 available slots filled with male students. David explains the reason for this model in-depth:

> *The Success Academy is for students who really are on close to their last leg. They are borderline going to be expelled from school or something because school's not working for them. They just don't get it. Now, it's not that they don't want to, usually. They mostly don't have the skill, the coping abilities to deal with the stressors of everyday life. If another student looks at them wrong, they might freak out a little bit. Or if another student acts out because of a disability, it causes a trickle-down effect. So the Success Academy has been put together to help kids learn those skills, to learn how to be a good student, and then transition from the Success Academy, either back into the high school that they came from, or maybe even a middle ground and transfer into the alternative school, which is a little more technology-driven.*

He goes on to detail how the Success Academy provides students with coping skills. The school district's behavioral experts work directly with teachers in each core class. This, paired with the small enrollment size, enables the teaching team to provide more of a one-on-one focus. David believes that "it is really about self-control and self-discipline and many of these kids have just never figured that out…this ratio makes a big difference to our kids, it allows us more personalized instructions, allows us to make better connections to those kids…you get to know their challenges and then you can help."

According to David, professionally-trained mental health experts work with district social workers and high school counselors to formulate course work and move students towards graduation, which is the ultimate goal. He anticipates that students will spend, on average, one semester at the Success Academy before, hopefully, returning to their school of origin or graduating:

> *That's the ultimate goal. They're not just shipped off to another location for a semester and forgotten about. Quite frankly, it's the opposite. They're given so much attention. Our goal is to make a difference, to have kids- I know I met with one mom who just cried and cried because she wished that this would have happened years ago. She felt like this was exactly what her kid needed, and appreciated the opportunity to do that instead of possibly being expelled from school, kicked out on the street for a year, and then what happens? They come back a year older, but a year farther behind, and that's not good for anybody either. We really want to strive to help them.*

In sum, participants identify insufficient space at the high-school level as the primary need of the DPPS and link this limitation with a rise in behavioral issues and the subsequent need for the Success Academy. At the same time, it is important to note that participants outside of DPSS do not know much about or understand the Success Academy (and likely do not understand the overcrowding issues faced by the school). For example, at the time of our interview, Sonja had never heard of the Success Academy and explains that the only issue that she is aware of at the high school is the mascot controversy.[6] Yet, she questions the Success Academy: "I'd like to look into that one because, I think my initial thought is: 'is separating the children a good idea or is it going to make things worse for them?" She goes on to pose a series of questions: "are we really finding the reason why they're misbehaving? Or are we just pushing them aside because we don't want to deal with it?" Because often times, complex trauma, their behavior is based off of what's happening to them. So, are we actually helping them by just pushing them away? Or are we going to actually communicate

[6] In response to a National Little People of America complaint, Dickinson High School was in the process of evaluating the "Midget" mascot. Considering changing the mascot is considered controversial in the community. As of Spring 2020, the school board has put this issue on hold to prioritize a focus on over-crowding.

with them and see what's really wrong?" Sonja's comments may indicate the community outside of DPSS does not share an understanding of the Success Academy with DPSS 'insiders.'

### *Mental Health Professional and Resource Shortages*

Participants also highlight mental-health professional staff shortages in the DPSS. Ashlynn says simply, "mental health is insanely understaffed and in demand." Later in this report, I show how participants believe that mental health issues are the foremost issue facing youth today; emerging from these discussions is exasperated discourse surrounding the shortage or perceived absence of providers.

"My God, there's so much depression here," exclaims Teresa, who moved to Dickinson five years prior. Similarly, Bethany—who is not originally from North Dakota—sees "a lot of mental health problems in North Dakota. We do not do well in the scale of people who commit suicide every year and it's horrible." She continues to explain that because Dickinson is such a youthful community that she notices "a lot of young people who suffer from mental health problems who can't figure out how to get help. And there's a stigma attached to getting help. And then we see them wind up overdosing on drugs or drinking and driving and killing themselves." As someone who works directly with youth exhibiting behavioral problems, Elise says, "I care a lot about mental health. It's a *huge* issue, and when I say huge, I would say 75 percent of the behavioral issues that we are dealing with are probably mental-health related." For Aaron, who not only works with DPSS but has children in the school system, finds these mental health issues "terrifying. I mean, you look at school shootings and you look at all those things that are happening. It's really, really scary."

While educators undergo an annual mental-health training, Ashlynn describes it as "surface-level." Participants uniformly describe a lack mental health providers and resources in the school system and within the community, more broadly. Aaron notes that "we're short a psychologist in the district. So now we could have as many as four and we're *lucky* to have two. So what we had to do is be creative. It's hard to get them. Some positions are just hard. And that's in high demand." Margery expresses the sentiments of each participant: "we really need mental health resources out here. We just do. And having a Badlands Human Service Center, it's good. Because if we didn't have it, we'd have nothing." Yet, Ashlynn, Margery, Bethany and others note that if individuals are uninsured or on medicaid they do not qualify for some providers. In addition, adults believe that waiting list at

Badlands Human Service Center is months long, though BHSC accepts medicaid and offers services on a sliding-scale.[7] Furthermore, Elise points out that these services are often not youth-specific.[8]

Participants believe that youth-specific services are needed because youth communicate differently, lack adult-level coping skills, and understand life through different (often shortsighted) frames. Elise bluntly says, "we have no mental health resources for juveniles. None…when I'm talking about mental health, school counselors and social workers can only do so much—and most of it is academic-based. What about outside of school? It's almost impossible. What about kids that are suicidal? I can hardly get them into a mental health facility because there are no beds available…there is *nothing* available in western North Dakota." Ashlynn provides another example: "I had a kid diagnosed with five diagnoses two Fridays ago. Bipolar, split-personality; he had manic depression, anger issues, and auditory hallucinations. And they were back in school on Tuesday after the Monday off because there's no bed for them. And *we're* supposed to deal with him…I love my job [but] I am in no way trained to do psychiatric work…I think we could make it better but we need the resources first."

Elise, Margery, and Teresa believe this shortage of providers is due to a shortage of financial resources. Elise recounts her struggle to form a crisis intervention team training program: "it all comes down to budgeting and finances. I've approached my administration to go to a [juvenile and adult] crisis intervention team training to learn…and it was denied because it's going to cost about three grand to send one person to that training." While Elise's training would involve a 'train-the-trainer' session so that she could train other people in the community for free, she explains that it's hard to "grasp those concepts" and find the funding for those initial costs.

Aaron, Tommy, Ashlynn, Bethany, David, and Andrew discuss the difficulty of recruiting qualified mental health professionals to the community. These participants note that there are few "pull" factors in Dickinson. Not only can providers find higher-paying work elsewhere, but Dickinson lacks desirable amenities for young professionals and families. Finally, a number of participants—like David, Margery, and Bethany—allude to a community NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) mentality

[7] I contacted BHSC on 14 April 2020. After speaking to individuals in "Intake" and "Billing," I was informed that the waiting list for individual counseling was "long" but they could not offer an estimate. Because of this wait, BHSC often refers people out to other community providers, though "Intake" did not have a list of providers handy, and could not list any during our phone call.

[8] According to a representative from "Intake," BHSC offers several youth-specific services including: group and individual therapy for substance use and TIPS (which offers a case manager for other services in the community). I was lead to believe that adolescent seeking individual mental health therapy would be added to the "long" waiting list.

when it comes to mental health resources. Bethany says that the community is "staunchly against" resources like treatment facilities and "chase them out." She believes "people think, 'not in *my* neighborhood.' It's like, 'no, *your* neighbors have problems.'" David, who moved to Dickinson in the past few years, explains:

> *There are very limited additional resources for kids in that mental health piece. Dickinson as a whole- there was a conversation I remember last year about a mental health facility coming in and occupying the space of the old hospital. That generated a lot of community concern that all the local neighbors around didn't want a bunch of crazy people living in that place. It's just that mentality that we have. People recognize that there's a problem, but nobody fixes it. Nobody has solutions. Or our state, you know, they don't fund schools in a way that would allow schools to hire mental health experts. They fund schools in ways that schools have always done business, not to meet these new challenges.*

As a direct result of the paucity of providers in the area, nearly every participant relays a story of someone in crisis who had to leave the community for services. A lack of services for adults has clear implications for youth. Margery recalls:

> *I just had a mom two weeks ago- she's a single mom and she has three kids. And it was just hard. She ended up having to go to the hospital in Fargo but she didn't have any support there. What happens to your kids? Her kids had to get placed with social services temporarily until she could get out of the hospital. So she is just there trying to get well but now she is also worrying about her kids. We need more resources.*

Teresa, who works with young survivors of trauma, relays a story from one of the young women she supports: "I ask them those kinds of questions: 'what do you think would have prevented you from this situation? I just asked my 12-year old and she's like, 'if my mom had maybe the help from a doctor to help her with her depression.'"

These findings echo those in the 2019 *Community Health Needs Assessment* (CHNA)[9] conducted by the Center for Rural Health out of the University of North Dakota's School of Medicine and Health Sciences. In a survey of the Dickinson Service Area, residents identify the availability of mental health services as the third most important need of youth in the community. While the CHNA survey identified "drug use and abuse" and "alcohol use and abuse" as pressing concerns, surprisingly these issues rarely arose in interviews; instead, participants' concern lies in the area of mental health.[10] Further, the CHNA report notes that in comparison to the rest of the state (and nationally),

[9] Howe, Melana. 2019. *Community Health Needs Assessment: Dickinson Service Area, North Dakota.* Grand Forks, ND: Center for Rural Health, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

[10] Tommy, Bethany, and Teresa were notable exceptions; each noting the rise of opioid use in the community, though linking it primarily with adult usage.

Stark County has a low number of mental health providers and a substandard ratio of providers to residents.[11] Similarly, the participants in *Assessing the Gaps* notice this shortage and deem it dangerous and aggravating. While some illustrate the "creative" ways in which the community is responding—with tele-medical services and tele-therapy—these efforts frustrate Margery: "I think our kids deserve a face-to-face, one-on-one appointment with a real person that they could really feel like, 'I know you care enough about me.'"

### *Turn-Over*

The final issue participants focus on in interviews is the high rate of turn-over in the student body. David describes the situation: "one of the challenges for our students, is that, out of the 4,000+ students we have in our district, more than 25 percent of those students come and go in a given year. They come and go—mostly come. We do grow…it creates a turnover of over a quarter of our population." He explains, "a fair amount of the population has a temporary mindset: they're only here in Dickinson for the next three, four, five years…this has a direct impact on kids, too, because kids don't feel like home is home."

According to David, this creates a unique environment in the DPSS in which the community does not invest in its schools. In particular, when thinking about long-term goals, "parents aren't aware of any conversation you've had two years ago because they are new. As you try to involve the community in creating solutions, it's a continual challenge for Dickinson because we literally have 25 percent of our population change at the student level every year. Which, most school districts don't deal with that kind of roll-around." The transient nature of the community creates distinct challenges for the school system, including a community that does not fully understand the issues that the school system faces and seemingly temporary, uninvested families. For example, Aaron, David, and Ashlyn locate the failure of two referendums petitioning for a new high school in this turnover. "When your community is feeling like they're temporary, it makes it way easier to not vote on building new schools," claims David. Aaron adds another piece of the puzzle when he says, "in North Dakota [a new school] means a property tax increase…that's really hard, especially if you think you will be moving in a year or two and then don't see it as benefiting your family."

[11] Stark County has 1 provider for every 730 residents, compared to the state average of 1:610 and the ratio of the top 10% of U.S. states who have a ration of 1:330 (Howe 2019).

In addition, Ashlynn's narrative highlights that some of the student body is under-resourced because of how quickly families move. As families often move to the area for jobs, they may also be relocating without material resources. Ashlynn sees this in her school, "especially with the new students that we're getting in, we need to provide resources or physical materials." She goes on:

> *Like today I'm cleaning out my garage, and I was going to take it to the thrift store or whatever and donate it, but then I got a family that moved in and they have nothing. They just up and left. We don't know the whole story yet, but we know they have nothing. All my pots and pans, I said she can have them, because I got a new set. This girl needs shoes, so I'm gonna go through my daughters' shoes. We provided backpacks for both girls filled with supplies. We're seeing a lot of that. I think they are going here for jobs because they don't have the money…it's shocking to me what student's don't have at home.*

While these physical resources are immensely important, students also face educational challenges. In particular, with the influx of students from around the globe, English is not always their first language. For Ashlynn, "the education piece is the biggest challenge for them because we don't have the staff and we don't have the resources necessary to communicate." She explains that the school resorts to Google Translate, but that additional support staff would benefit students.

In sum, the transience of the Dickinson-area population poses unique challenges for the public school district, financially and educationally. People within the DPSS see families as less invested in the long-term well-being of the community and school system, in particular. Staffing shortages further exacerbate overcrowding issues and prevent the school system from meeting all of a diverse student body's needs—in particular, mental health, language, and cultural resources for students. At the same time, Ashlynn highlights an important community strength within this instability when she says, "I feel like our students are very accepting. That is a huge strength, I want to say, of the high school and the students. They're so accepting of new people." While schools themselves may be faced with issues, socially, Ashlyn believes that students may be learning to adapt to instability and welcome diversity.

### *Homeschool Community Challenges*

The homeschooling community in southwestern North Dakota has grown exponentially in recent years, according to Mariah, an active homeschooler and community advocate. According to Mariah, the community consists of three, fairly distinct groups: fundamental Christians, parents who feel their children are not served by the traditional school system (either "gifted" or "challenging" students), and, "kids that are threatened in some way. We have a large group of kids that become

homeschoolers because of the threats. Because they are being bullied in the school system." The rise in bullying is particularly concerning for Mariah:

> *So I am seeing more and more, especially at the junior high level. We suddenly have an influx of junior high and high school kids joining our homeschool group, and it's because of bullying. Flat out, we have a real issue in our community right now, and it's not being acknowledged. The bullying is not being acknowledged.*

Mariah goes on to tell several stories of young people who were bullied out of traditional schools and who sought refuge in homeschools.

When asked about challenges faced by homeschoolers, Mariah responds without hesitation that the number one challenge is a "lack of resources. Because we have to pay for everything our self." She goes on to list her monthly expenses which include things like music lessons, rentals, martial arts classes, and curriculum costs. She and other parents share and exchange resources to help save money, but she expresses feeling as if homeschoolers have to work twice as hard to create the same opportunities that students in the public school system take for granted—particularly social- and physical- education opportunities. Mariah organizes group classes and community outings, but craves more community support: "I sure would love to be able to say, 'Hey, there is an art class they're offering in the summertime for homeschoolers,' or something. We can sign up for things through the rec-center, but it would be nice to pool some of those resources. They can still accommodate some of the homeschoolers, but not in a 'we're going to public school' type setting."

## Career Academy

The interview protocol specifically probes participants' thoughts on the proposed career academy model at Dickinson High School. According to David, who has an administrative role in the school system, a career academy model of education offers students a sequential curriculum grouped by career focus. This model intends to better prepare students for careers and post-secondary education by forging partnerships with community employers and Dickinson State University to offer focused, hands-on learning. Ashlynn, who works directly with youth, explains that students select an academy in their second year and then take classes that emphasize the skills necessary to pursue a particular career path. In addition, Ashlynn notes that courses will offer certification in various trades and opportunities for students to "go out in the community and work the jobs for a credit and job experience." David believes that this model will help DHS "remain relevant" in the community:

> *We're a very high-needs [community] with diesel mechanics and CDLs and welders. We've got those corporations eager to partner with the school district, and the high school primarily, to give kids an opportunity to come and job shadow, give kids an opportunity to come and even work in the company for a couple of weeks and learn more about it…we think we can meet a lot of needs locally.*

Aaron, another administrator, believes that the career model engages students in the learning process: "it's really to keep the kids engaged…the academy gets kids excited and it gets them more choice ready, whether they want to go into a job after school or [college]."

Yet, participants reveal an adult community divided. Ashlynn claims, "I love the idea of the academy. I am 100 percent in! …We can be doing so much better for our students," while Tommy states: "I'm anonymous, right? I think it's dog crap." Still others are more ambivalent. Bethany—who works in higher education—states, "I don't know a whole lot about it. I don't see it as something that's well-defined right now. I think even in some of the teachers that I spoke to, they are kind of trying to figure out how they fit in with career academy too."

While all participants emphasize the benefit of 'hands-on education,' some worry that the career academy model will reduce classroom diversity or 'track' students. Tommy, an educator who thinks of this model as 'dog crap,' explains:

> *Okay, so the theory that you get a bunch of students with the same interests going through the same pathways, that's a pretty good theory. But there's a big block of kids that don't have really any interests, and I was like that too. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up; I didn't have any idea. And another theory that you can get to know 300 kids because you're in your pathways is kind of messed up too…My father doesn't like career academies at all because it's targeting and it's channeling students. And we all know that diversity in a classroom is way better than having a bunch of meat heads that think alike…I'm afraid that [diversity] is going to go away. Shop class isn't going to get the volleyball girls, not going to get the kid that's going to be an architect.*

Instead, Tommy emphasizes that schools should develop career-focused classes: "designing a math class that would work into construction and architecture, or nursing." He believes shifting coursework, rather than adopting "academies," will prepare students and maintain student diversity.

According to adult participants, there is no clear youth consensus on the career academy model and Ashlynn and Andrew believe that students are "confused." Ashlynn explains: "I don't they they understand it because there's been so much controversy between teachers…I don't think they truly understand what the academy model looks like." Conversely, Tommy believes that students hold beliefs similar to his own: "They hate it. For the same reasons. They still don't know what they want to do. They can't understand why adults think that they would. And they don't like to be

tracked. They're smart; they realize that it takes kids of all different levels in a particular classroom to really make it tick." On the other hand, David thinks that students see the benefits of the academy model. Taking on the perspective of the student, he says:

> *If I'm a high school student who is contemplating going into the medical field because I might want to be a nurse or a doctor or something, then I can enter into that academy that is focused more on the medical field. And now my teachers, as we're working on assignments, they're working more on direct relationships to the medical field. And that helps me even learn more about the medical field. It helps me to play to my interests. If I am interested in the medical field, then it's awesome that my math, English, science, and social studies teacher might be all having conversations about things related to the medical field.*
>
> *Oftentimes we find in the academies, when teachers are working together, they will have a lot of cross-curricular conversations to where the history teacher and the math teacher and the science teacher, they might collectively be working on a big project. Now, students are getting it from three different angles, but it's one project. It really helps with student motivation. It helps with student engagement, and that's really a big focus…turning that ownership of education over to kids.*

While there remains a split in opinion on the career academy amongst adult participants, most believe that this model of education will be implemented at DHS in the upcoming years.

The conversations with adult participants about the career academy model reveal two important findings for *Assessing Gaps in the System:* (1) a lack of gender consciousness in educational planning and, (2) the absence of youth engagement or a clear youth perspective. I discuss the implications of these findings below.

While participants highlight potential benefits and drawbacks of the academy model, they reveal an assumption that the rewards or disadvantages of this educational model are evenly distributed amongst the student body. In other words, participants did not view the academy model through a lens that gives attention to gender, race, or class. As this project is particularly interested in young women's readiness for adulthood, it is important to note that adults in the education system are not considering how the academy model may reify or challenge gendered choices and achievement.[12] A rich body of social research establishes that gendered socialization patterns produce different ways of responding to the world and

## Key Findings

Conversations with adult participants about the **career academy model** reveal two key findings:

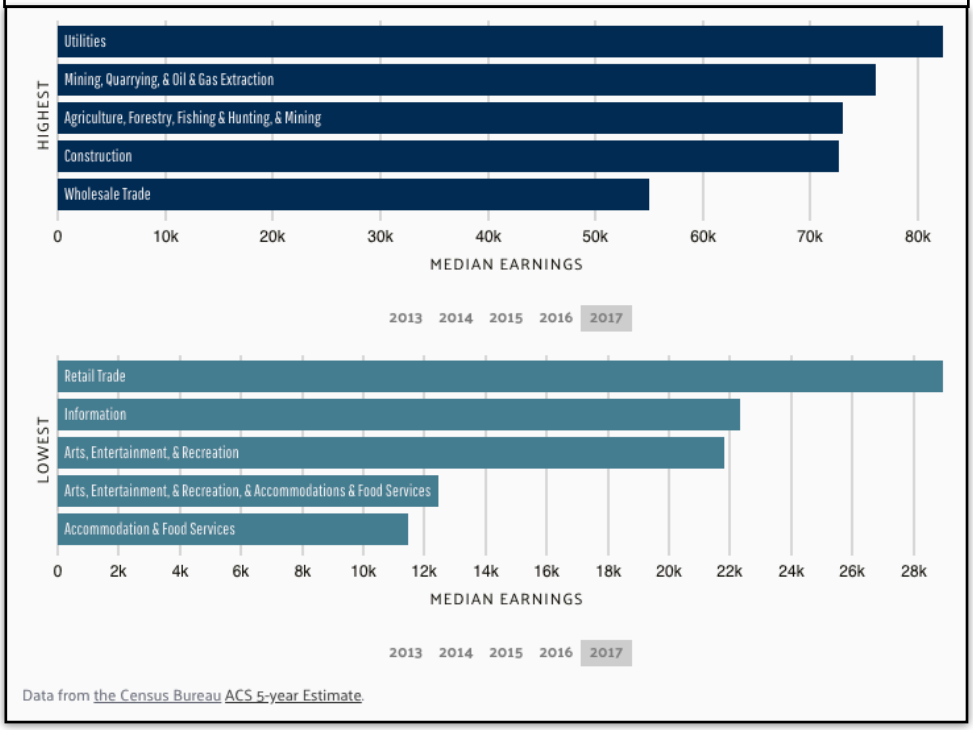
1. A lack of gender consciousness in educational planning
2. The absence of youth engagement and a clear youth perspective

[12] Racial consciousness was also conspicuously absent from these conversations. However, participants did integrate class-awareness into their discussions of the career academy model.

making sense of it. In turn, this influences how and what boys and girls learn, what they understand as appropriate behavior, and their expectations for careers and families.[13] In addition, given that men enroll in and graduate from vocational programs at higher rates than women;[14] that sub-baccalaureate jobs are highly gender-segregated, with the highest paying jobs dominated by men;[15,16] and the dearth of masculinized job opportunities in western North Dakota, considering the career academy model through a gendered lens holds the potential to help alleviate gendered disparities in income and early-career transitions for those young people who wish to remain in the community.

In their examination of high schools in blue-collar communities, April Sutton, Amanda Bosky, and Chandra Muller (2016) find that curriculums which emphasize vocational training and fewer advanced college-preparatory courses benefit men while disadvantaging women.[17] Their analysis shows that while young men benefit from the school-to-work link, young women are "less likely

**Figure 1: Highest and Lowest Paying Jobs in Stark County**




[13] Murphy, Patricia and Jannette Elwood. 1998. "Gendered Learning Outside and Inside School: Influences on Achievement" pp. 162-181 in *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement* edited by Epstein, Debbie, Hannette Elwood, Valerie Hey, and Janet Maw. Open University Press, Philadelphia, PA.

[14] Sutton, April, Amanda Bosky, and Chandra Muller. 2016. "Manufacturing Gender Inequality in the New Economy: High School Training for Work in Blue-Collar Communities." American Sociological Review 81(4): 720-748.

[15] Carnevale et al. 2011) Carnevale, Anthony P., Stephen J. Rose, and Andrew R. Hanson. 2012. *Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

[16] Carnevale, Anthony P., Nicole Smith, James R. Stone III, Pradeep Kotamraju, Bruce Steuernagel, and Kimberly A. Green. 2011. *Career Clusters: Forecasting Demand for High School through College Jobs, 2008–2018.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

[17] Sutton, April, Amanda Bosky, and Chandra Muller. 2016. "Manufacturing Gender Inequality in the New Economy: High School Training for Work in Blue-Collar Communities." American Sociological Review 81(4): 720-748.

## TAKE HOME

In asking young women what they think about the **career academy model**, Women Empowering Women is uniquely positioned to engage young women in conversations surrounding their educational opportunities and to provide feedback to adults who work with youth.

to work and to be employed in professional occupations," and suffer "severe wage penalties relative to their male peers and women from non-blue-collar communities" (720). Given the prevalence of high-paying, male-dominated, 'blue-collar' jobs in Stark County — "utilities," "mining, quarrying, & oil & gas extraction" and "agriculture," see **Figure 1**[18] —these findings indicate that career and technical education training programs in high schools should consider ways in which to also emphasize academically rigorous coursework that will benefit women (who receive greater returns from higher education)[19] or to plan curricula that specifically challenges stereotypes that prevent young women from pursuing high-paying, blue-collar jobs in the community and that create un-welcoming workplaces.

In addition, these findings indicate that students should be more involved in official and unofficial conversations about the career academy model. Multiple participants identify "choice" and "decision-making skills" as key aspects to empowerment. Yet, as Andrew divulges, when it comes to career academy decisions, "students have been a bit left out of this process." In interviews with youth, young women should be presented with different perspectives on the career academy model and asked their thoughts and opinions. In asking young women what they think about the career academy model, Women Empowering Women is uniquely positioned to engage young women in conversations surrounding their educational opportunities and to provide feedback to adults who work with youth.

[18] "Figure 1: Highest and Lowest Paying Jobs in Stark County" based on US Census data and generated by Data USA. The US Census Bureau finds that "Mining, Quarrying & Oil & Gas Extraction" is the primary industry in Stark County, followed by "Health Care and Social Assistance," "Retail Trade," Manufacturing," and "Transportation & Warehousing," placing Stark County squarely within the definition of 'blue-collar' community.

[19] DiPrete, Thomas A., and Claudia Buchmann. 2006. "Gender-Specific Trends in the Value of Education and the Emerging Gender Gap in College Completion." *Demography* 43(1):1–24.

## II. Contemporary Opportunities and Challenges Facing Youth: Gender [Still] Matters

> **"Talk to these young women and be like, 'you know what? You can do whatever you want to do.' I think it's powerful because instead of some man in school telling them that they can do whatever they want, they can actually see women. And we can tell them how we got here. My biggest fear for the longest time was 'I can't do this because I'm too nice.' I think getting rid of those stereotypes. That, you know what? You as a female, your role is very valuable in these male-dominated fields."**
> **-Elise**

Interviews with adults provide unique insights into some of the contemporary opportunities and challenges facing youth in southwestern North Dakota. Participants identify several prominent issues—**jobs, mental health, technology, a lack of recreational opportunities, and family**—and in my analysis, I pay particular attention to how participants discuss or do not discuss gender. In some interviews, talk of gender or gender differences in local opportunities emerged organically; while in others, I specifically probed for participants' thoughts on if and how gender still matters for youth. What these interviews reveal is that gender *still* matters for young women in southwestern North Dakota. Participants believe that pervasive gender stereotypes continue to influence decision-making and that girls and women experience gender-based vulnerabilities, interact with technology differently, and continue to face a highly segregated job market after graduation.

In the following pages, three distinct sections connect several salient themes: **(1) Mental Heath, Technology, and Media; (2) Empowerment, Success, and Readiness in an "Oil Community"; and (3) Vulnerable Students and Foundational Families.** Within this discussion, challenges for young women and notable gaps emerge in their readiness emerge; these challenges and gaps represent opportunities through which Women Empowering Women can make a difference for young women in the community.

## Mental Health, Technology, and Media

Mental health represents a pervasive, unmet need in the Dickinson community. Each participant discusses mental health as a significant issue faced by young women, and most express exasperation at the lack of providers and resources in the region. Participants locate the roots of mental health issues in technology, believing that youth today do not have the opportunity to "disconnect" and, therefore, experience pronounced levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, paired with diminished coping skills.

Ashlynn estimates that 30 percent of the student body at DHS have diagnosed mental health issues; she believes that number would be higher if students with depression and anxiety had official diagnoses. Participants note a distinct rise in mental health issues. For example, Andrew—now in his thirties— explains, "I'm not saying the school that I attended was absolutely perfect by any means, but these kinds of things were not happening whatsoever when I was in school." Participants believe that the issues they see in Dickinson mirror national trends. Further, they tie the rise in mental health issues to the simultaneous increase in "screen time," "technology use," and the pervasiveness of "social media." Ashlynn speaks on behalf of most participants when she says, "I feel like cellphones and social media are obviously 90 percent of the problem." Andrew deepens this explanation:

> *I think kids spend too much time on electronics and I don't think there's enough time for human interactions. It's through the course of playing on a playground or running around your neighborhood, or playing in the sandbox where you learn to navigate issues. You learn those interpersonal components to how a relationship works. If you spend four to five-plus hours a day interacting with a system that is dependent upon what you tell it to do, I think there is a certain amount of control that goes along with that. That is not how human relationships work. Human relationships don't work based on one person having total control. Relationships are things that need to be negotiated and when you don't know how to negotiate, I think you're going to…have less of an ability to manage your distress.*

In this way, participants identify technology (screens, generally) and particular forms of technology (like social media) as intertwining to form the primary challenge facing youth today. David highlights the implications of this: "high school kids today, they don't talk to each other very much. They do it through text. So we see that in the work world, businesses and industry are struggling with young people staying on task." In sum, these participants fear that young people are less able to engage in face-to-face human interactions and relationships, have shorter attention spans, and diminished coping skills because technology is so one-dimensional.

While participants believe that technology impacts the mental health of all youth, they note that young women face distinct challenges. "Probably one of the biggest issues we are seeing with girls is technology- the promiscuity of sex and their bodies…sending out nude photos…it seems like an epidemic," explains Andrew. Similarly, Elise describes sexting—the exchange of sexually explicit messages or images on a variety of digital platforms—as an "epidemic," that effects young women and girls differently than men: "sexting is the issue that we're facing…it's everywhere, even the guys; but the guys don't care. It's almost like a badge of honor to send a dick pic to somebody." Ashlynn agrees: "boys are doing it, too, but girls by far are more effected. I don't know, it's so demeaning… because they usually do it not for the right reasons, they do it to get attention. But then the attention they get isn't the right attention. And the body image! Why do you feel you need to do that to get a boy's attention?"

Multiple participants within the DPSS report instances of young men sharing or threatening to share nude photos of girls as a form of blackmail. According to Ashlynn: "we got two boys charged this year…Then they just collected a phone that had hundreds of nudes sent to hundred of boys from a girl." Elise shares a story about another, recent "huge, huge case" in which a young man posted multiple women's pictures to his public Snapchat story, while calling them demeaning names. In this case, "some of these pictures were two or three years old of these nude young girls. So some of those girls were like, 'Yeah, you know what, we had to learn our lesson.' Those kinds of things. And then other girls are struggling a lot with it. Because now their nude images are out there for the whole world to see."

In a digital era, teenaged girls navigate new norms of sexuality and the performance of femininity. Participants perceive sexting as laden with a double-standard that leads to more severe social and emotional implications for young women. These adults see sexts as representing a "badge of honor" for young men, but they see sexts as a risky form of external validation for young women seeking attention. In this way, adults characterize sexts as a form of digital currency for men and a means by which young men can exploit, expose, and shame young women. Adults do not see sexts as potentially liberating or empowering for young women. At the same time, Elise believes that young women feel a false sense of empowerment, though she empathizes with the pressures of performative desirability. Viewing sexually explicit messages through this framework, interviewees like Andrew, Ashlynn, and Elise question if young women's sexting behavior is rooted in poor self-esteem, or a lack of self-worth. Elise says, "I think that comes from the self-esteem. And I have no

idea how to increase a girl's feeling of self-worth. And that she is worth more… But I think for them they're like, 'He's going to tell me I'm beautiful, or that I have really nice boobs, or I have a nice butt.'" Notably, while participants acknowledge that both boys and girls engage in sexting, they do not question young men's motives nor do they provide examples of young women using sexts as a means to threaten or embarrass men. Rather, participants' narratives focus on explaining women's motivations and 'educating girls' about their self-worth rather than interventions for boys. Consequently, young women's motivations, bodies, behavior, and sexuality continue to be perceived as problematic and subject to intervention; whereas young men's sexual expressions and violations of trust and privacy are assumed to be natural and unchangeable.

## Empowerment, Success, and Readiness in an "Oil Community"

In this section, I focus on how participants discuss empowerment and success. Many participants link success to financial stability or "comfort," yet note that while there is an abundance of employment opportunities in southwestern North Dakota, occupational gender segregation persists. In these conversations, participants highlight how they believe gender stereotypes continue to influence young women's decision-making and, in part, shape their opportunities and challenges. Participants posit that navigating these stereotypes presents a prevailing challenge for Dickinson-area women and maintain that gaps in preparedness exist as young women enter adulthood. In this way, participants frame "readiness" in particular ways and characterize young people on the cusp of adulthood as academically prepared, but lacking in practical skills like personal finance, interpersonal communication, and critical thinking.

### *Empowerment and Success*

When thinking about empowerment, interviewees commonly define empowerment as a *feeling*. For example, Margery explains that empowerment is "seeing the value, feeling valued, being seen as important enough. If we feel that empowering young people is important, to me that says that…we recognize they're so important within our fabric of our community…If we empower them, we say to them, 'You're important. Your voice is important.'" Similarly, Ashlynn delineates empowerment as providing students with "the feelings within themselves that they can be successful…You can't touch empowerment but you can give them the resources, the beliefs, and the knowledge to feel empowered or to feel strong or to know within themselves that they can do it."

As Ashlynn suggests, most respondents think that in addition to feelings, empowerment is an action that involves seeing valuing in others and providing resources for self-development (in the form of beliefs, knowledge, and opportunity). Herein, Aaron questions the difference between encouraging and empowering, concluding that "empowering, to me, is even taking it to the next level and not just giving words. It's like providing the tools and the resources to help them succeed." David also takes this action-based approach to explain empowerment: "it means opportunities. Doors open, or at least ajar enough that kids can walk through. It's about giving them voice and choice." As an educator, David focuses on empowerment in schooling: "I think that, when students are involved in their education, when students have a choice of things to do, instead of school being an event that happens to them, they get to be part of their schooling, they get to make decisions, it is better for all." Choice is key for many. Sonja reminds us that "youth are not robots. Sometimes at school all they hear is, 'do this, do this.' And the same at home. But there's a mind there. There's ideas and determination," and therefore, for Sonja, cultivating the ability to make choices is imperative to empowerment. Mariah specifics that honoring choice for women, in particular, is empowering:

> *I don't think that we will have true empowerment as women until we value all choices for women, be it whether they are stay-at-home or whether they choose to be working outside the home. And maybe we help them with family leave or other issues when they have a baby. We need to acknowledge that women can have multiple choices and that all those choices are okay.*

Understanding how adults conceptualize empowerment is important because it reveals how adults approach relationships with young women and attempt to impart upon youth a sense of confidence and of power. For many, empowerment is closely linked with the concept of success.

For respondents, success is subjective and something that is defined by each individual. "That's an interesting one," says Sonja, "because everybody has different goals and different ideas of happiness in their own life. And so, I think that like success is when you can be happy and comfortable." Elise's response also highlights this perspective: "I think it's just more so like being able to live comfortably, and that's different for everybody." Like David and Aaron, Margery deflects the question: "I think the best people to ask would be young people, because they think about things differently than I do."

In addition to "happiness" most respondents believe that financial well-being plays a prominent role in success. This is apparent in Sonja and Elise's comments above, which allude to "comfort," and other, more direct remarks. Ashlynn says, "you don't have to go to college to be

successful. It's finding something after high school that allows you to be an independent adult and not living in poverty." Similarly, Tommy links happiness, money, and relationships in his definition: "I would hope that they would find something that they really like to do and figure out a way to make money at it. I mean, it can just be that simple, because so many things you can- at least I hope that they can make a living and are happy…I hope that they find someone that respects them for themselves and they're happy being with."

Yet, empowerment and success are believed to shift over the life-course. Margery summarizes the remarks of many when she says, "Oh yeah! What I saw as success when I was younger is much different now that I've been around for a little bit. It's just different. But I think it changes because of our experiences. We grow. We learn. We make it through some things. And we might say, 'Gosh, maybe that really wasn't as important as I thought it was.' So, I think [success and empowerment] changes."

Knowing that empowerment may look one way for women in their late teens and another way for women in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond, it's notable that participants identified some common threads of adult success: happiness, comfort, and financial independence. Emphasizing financial independence and financial comfort in "success" is important given how participants discuss opportunities and challenges in the community because participants implicitly acknowledge the barriers women face to entering high-paying oilfield or oil-adjacent work in the region.

### *Opportunities and Challenges*

As a whole, participants believe that the greatest regional opportunities are in jobs. North Dakota is perceived to be a state rich with employment opportunities. Tommy believes these job opportunities are equal for men and women: "there's jobs everywhere. If you can pass a urine test and you're breathing, you can find a job. And if you got your crap together, you can find a well-paying job…I think this is true for both men and women…if they want to work, they are out there working." Though Teresa says that if someone does not want to go into oil or agriculture, "it's grim." This may be particularly true for women, as all participants acknowledge the persistence of gender-segregated workforces in southwestern North Dakota.

When thinking about if challenges and opportunities differ for men and women in the community, Mariah focuses on potential obstacles for women:

> *I think it's harder to be taken serious in certain jobs. If you go to apply for an oilfield job, what are the odds they're going to hire the man over you? Probably going to hire the man just for the simple fact that they're just going to be stronger, so challenges that way. I think there's an unwritten bias sometimes that, if [women] have children, then it's going to be a pain in the butt to hire you. Because you're going to have to go to your school and deal with school issues or something, or maybe you have to get out at 3:15 to go pick up your child at school.*

Like other participants, Mariah points out that one of the primary occupational sectors in the area is heavily masculinized and that women may face challenges in entering (or remaining in) the field. Most participants offer essentialist reasons for why women do not enter into these high-paying, low-skill jobs, with their explanations centering on women's "natural proclivities," "personality," or their bodies. For example, Tommy explains that "it's tough physically. The higher-paying jobs are you're pumping wells or even the truck drivers, the hoses are heavy. And it's cold, it's nasty, it's hard…it might just be the physicality of it." In addition, Mariah's quote above highlights the perception that the "motherhood penalty"[20] and assumptions about gender continue to limit women's employability. Elise, a young professional herself, experiences this first-hand: "it is harder, for young women especially, to get some of those higher paying jobs. I can tell you that I'm paid lower than some of my counterparts and I have more experience than they do."

In acknowledging these disparities, participants focus on the importance of female role-models and female leaders. Tommy claims, "I don't think there's enough female bosses." He explains this is important because young women need to "have that role model." Elise, employed in a male-dominated industry, believes that there is power in bringing women into conversation with and mentoring girls. She recalls an experience at a recent industry event, which made her realize that young women crave these opportunities:

> *I can't tell you how many young ladies I had come up to me and were like, 'Can we get our picture with you? I want to be just like you some day! But I don't know if I can, I don't know if I'm strong enough.' And all they're looking at is gender—and good for them! But how do we get more involved —those of us that are in male-dominated fields—to help these young women see that they can do*

[20] Budig, Michelle J. And Paula England. 2001. "The Wage Penalty for Motherhood." *American Sociological Review* 66(2): 204-225.

The "motherhood penalty" refers to the lower hourly pay and wage gap associated with mothers—roughly 7 percent per child. According to Budig and England (2001): "Mothers may earn less than other women because having children causes them to (1) lose job experience, (2) be less productive at work, (3) trade-off higher wages for mother-friendly jobs, or (4) be discriminated against by employers" (204).

> *whatever they want? How do we get females from the oil industry? …But we do have these stereotypes and it's hard. Helping these women to know the challenges that we face…and explain to them what these challenges are. So when you get a female from the oilfield, them being able to explain: 'what challenges do you face there and how do you handle those challenges.' Because I think giving these young women that opportunity to know how that situation is handled and what they need to do, and it's coming from women that are in that field, is invaluable.*

Participants like Elise note that gendered stereotypes continue to exist and to influence young women's perception of the opportunities and challenges they face in the adult world.

Adults believe that young women notice these differences with a sense of begrudging resignation. For example, Mariah's daughter is an a male-dominated field; and she admits, "I wouldn't be surprised if there's some opportunities that happen or don't, sad to say, just because she is a female, which bugs her to no end." Similarly, Margery offers an personal anecdote:

> *My son when he graduated from high school, and he said, "I'm going to school in Wahpeton. I'm getting a master's diesel technician degree. When I graduate, I'm getting a job. And I won't work for anything less than $30 an hour." And I went, "What? Are you kidding? I have worked over 20 years and I still haven't made that kind of money. Okay?" My girls went to hair school…and know that they will have to work very hard for a long time to make that kind of money. My girls have a perception about how [the oilfield] would be different for them. My son thought very differently. And I just have to say he got a job and he started out at $28 an hour. And I am like, 'That's not fair!' So, here's the girl part of me: 'That's not fair. That is not right. There's a little inequality here a little bit.' But I do see that it's different.*

Later, Margery reveals that one of her daughters joined a fencing crew in her twenties. As the only woman on the crew, "she was treated different because she was a girl. And I mean, she just said, 'Mom, it's not right. It's not right that that happens.' And it made my heart feel sad that it's still happening. We've come so far that those things should not happen anymore. We should all be equal. But in all reality, I know that some of the men in this community make a whole lot more than females." Margery's experience of raising a son and daughters in the region, shapes her view that young men and women view their opportunities differently. In her experience, young men stride confidently into high-paying jobs immediately upon graduation from high school or technical college; whereas young women forgo entering into high-paying jobs because of fears of differential treatment, with the hope that over the course of their lifetime, their wages will eventually 'catch-up.' Her perception of income inequality is confirmed in the US Census Bureau's 2017 estimates, in which the median annual wage for women is $41,174, compared to that of men at $64,449 (See **Figure 2**, below).[21] Median annual wage difference do not account for differences *within* jobs, but rather

[21] Figure 2 courtesy of: Women Empowering Women. 2020. "Status of Women and Children in Dickinson and Stark County."

indicate that, on average and regardless of industry or job position, men continue to out-earn women in Dickinson and Stark County.

**Figure 2:** Median Earnings

Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months by Gender by Work Status

| Area | Persons ages 16 and older with earnings | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Women | | Men | | Gender wage gap for full-time, year-round workers |
| | Number working full-time year round | Median annual wage | Number working full-time year round | Median annual wage | |
| Dickinson | 3,243 | $41,176 | 5,887 | $64,449 | **36%** |
| Stark County | 4,345 | $41,904 | 7,933 | $65,654 | **37%** |
| North Dakota | 113,587 | $39,223 | 173,080 | $53,682 | **27%** |
| United States | 47,532,408 | $41,650 | 63,393,316 | $51,859 | **19%** |

Source: B20005 & B19326 US Census Bureau, 2017 5 Year Estimates

Like Margery, who notes that her son perceives his earning potential differently than his sisters and believes his labor will have high-value, Bethany points out that her male and female students display vastly different confidence levels, regardless of industry:

> *My male students have had interviews with employers and they're like, 'Oh, yeah, I'd probably get a call tomorrow.' They're really confident. And then I ask my female students and it's, 'I think it went good. I don't know. They said they were going to call me tomorrow.'…It is a completely different confidence level. And I think that is pretty typical of our female students in the Dakotas…I do think that sometimes our younger female students, especially when they're in the workplace, they shoot for entry-level. And they're like, 'That's what I'm qualified for.' They shoot for the qualifications, not their potential. My male students will shoot for their potential. They'll apply for a mid-level positions that they're not qualified for. They'll shoot for their potential. And it happens all the time. And, my female students, I'm like, "You're all so gifted and so talented. Don't shoot for your qualifications, shoot for your potential." And how can we communicate that to young women to start shooting for their potential, aim high, aim higher? And don't just give your two cents. Give your opinion.*

Similarly, Tommy, who trains a lot of students who transition from high school directly into trades, believes that women do not pursue technical training "because it's a room full of boys…I've asked girls…and you have to be pretty confident as a female, I think, to put yourself in that environment."

The participants above highlight that young women and young men often perceive their economic opportunities, abilities, and earning potential in distinctly gendered ways. At the same time, Bethany asserts, "I think [stereotypes] are changing. I don't think it's were it needs to be, but I think it's changing." These changes are opening up new pathways for women in the community and questions about if young women are 'ready to adult.'

### *Readiness*

The interview protocol asks a series of questions about "readiness." These inquiries ask if young women are prepared for adult-responsibilities like managing personal finances, accessing health—mental, physical, and sexual—resources, or able to critically evaluate media messages to

discern fact from fiction. Respondents overwhelmingly assert that "no," young women—at least recent high school graduates—are not equipped to successfully grapple with these challenges. In addition, respondents note that some young people lack interview skills and do not know how to build a resume. Young women, in particular, do not have the tools to navigate sexism they may face in the workforce. For many, these gaps perpetuate current inequalities.

All respondents claim that the high school can be "doing a better job" in preparing students for life outside of school. Ashlynn, for example, believes that students really lack communication abilities, creativity, and real-world skills: "I feel like academically and job-wise, we do a decent job. But personally, I don't think that's the most important piece. Students don't know how to communicate or to manage a checkbook. It's all those things behind the scenes. We need to also teach them how to live in a normal world." Similarly, Bethany explains:

> *In general, what I am seeing is that they're fairly well prepared to be in college…in terms of are they prepared to pick a career path? I don't think so… Every step along the way, they're told what to do. They're told when lunch is. They're told when school gets out and when school starts, "Here are the rules. This is what you do. Take your homework." Everything is set in stone, basically. And then they get to college, and they have this freedom of choice. And it's a completely different environment. And so, that's difficult for them. And then on top of that, we're like, "Now, choose your life." And no, they're not ready to do that.*

Mariah reports that teaching young people to critically assess options and make choices should be an educational priority: "We don't fill a bucket, we light a fire…the idea is that children are not empty receptacles that you just stuff information into. Instead, what we do is we give them a passion for learning. We light that fire, and we teach them how to find those resources themselves…I think we do too much of that where we try to shove so much information into a child, instead of teaching them, here is how you learn. Here is how you find resources."

Teresa, who works with youth outside of schools, links critical thinking skills with real-world applications. As she relays a story about walking a young woman through how to budget, she sighs, "they can't critically think." In thinking about personal finance, David says, "I think most schools don't have a specific personal finance requirement to graduate high school…We know that's probably another area where we could do better. We know that a lot of college kids, whether you're female or male, don't understand the college debt impacts. They're quick to go to college and have $100,000 in debt and get a degree in something that's never going to generate enough income to hardly ever pay that debt off." Sonja, the 'outsider' in the sample, speaks to "readiness" from a personal perspective:

"I was not really ready. I think- I wish- I think that I would have appreciated help…maybe a better future plan. I feel like I could have gotten scholarships. I could have gotten the further education… like really digging deeper into why this is an important step of life." She expresses her wish that adults in her life would have provided the 'why' and assisted her in evaluating choices, something she considers key to adulthood. Tommy acknowledges these gaps in "life-skills" but tempers his response: "I don't think they're any less prepared than we were. Is anybody ready? I think answers are a lot easier to find than they were then."

Overall, respondents posit that students are academically on-par with the state and nation (and will be even more so with the academy model), but they point to the need for mental health curricula, a tool or course for media literacy, and controversial gaps in the sexual-health program. As an administrator in the school system, David thinks it's the role of schools to provide this sort of 'life-skills' education: "You bet! Whether I think we should or not, I think the community has an expectation that we should. I think that society as a whole has an expectation that kids can do some of that. So, I think we should." Respondents speak about filling these gaps with excitement and explain that regardless of student's home life, school has the potential to be a great equalizing force. Yet, as Ashlynn explains, the school is limited by time: "it comes down to time, we just don't have enough of it." Sonja wishes there were more volunteers or opportunities for students to gain these skills. And most interviewees, reference their hopes that students can get this knowledge at home. Throughout interviews, family emerges as a central topic.

## Vulnerable Students and Foundational Families

"If you come from a stable home are you are going to be more successful than if you are trying to make it day by day at home. It probably sounds cliché but it's the truth. I don't work with many students that come from a very broken home or a home with no rules that go off to be more successful," says Ashlynn. She continues to assert that, "successful, empowered students have the resources at home and the support at home…so I feel like the base that they build and home and the support that they get at home—or don't get at home—builds that foundation… if you don't start with that foundation at home, it's really hard to break out of that unless something significant happens." Here, Ashlynn begins to paint a portrait of "vulnerable students" that most participants hold in common.

While Teresa points out that "every youth is vulnerable," she goes on to say that kids "have been told they suck and they are worthless…It goes back to the home. Home life. Every kid that's in the system comes from a broken home." Across the board, participants link risk-factors and vulnerability to home life. Andrew actively thinks through this question of vulnerability:

> *What do I believe is at the core of the problem? I almost think that it has to do with love and compassion towards one another in a family unit, and perhaps missing a component of that. That and you have people who don't have a lot of access to resources. Something as simple as having a prosocial, positive relationship to be able to engage with on a consistent long-term basis. I think there's definitely a family component here that is really important. Sometimes I think we focus on what are the issues of the kids, which is really important. I think one of the biggest things I've realized since being in school is the development between the ages of zero to three and the ability to intervene at that time is probably more important, or at least just as important.*

Participants often referred to "good families," explaining that stability, love, and appropriate boundaries help to foster resilient youth, what Andrew calls 'pro-social, positive relationships.' Yet, Margery believes that "parents are struggling. I think parents have less support today than they did 24 years ago when I started." Thus, participants also point out that families can be an exciting site of intervention and they would like to see programs that bring parents and youth together to help improve readiness outcomes. For example, when talking about personal finance, Elise says:

> *I don't think we realize how much these, especially young girls, worry about their family dynamic…We're going to stress when they tell us, "Well, I'm sorry, you can't go to the movies because we just can't afford it." But they're not going to understand why. "Why not? You work. You have money." But I think being able to involve them. I'm not saying that they have to be involved in the full finances of the home, but I think involving them earlier. Even when they're 15, 16 years old, and being yeah, this is a real life budget. This is what our budget looks like. This is how expensive it is. And maybe encouraging them to work together with their families to be like, "Oh, yeah, no, it is expensive to live. It is expensive. But you know what? Let's take this finance class."*

Many locate the roots of youth empowerment and success within families, but also impart the importance of recreational opportunities or "having something to do." Nearly all participants reference a lack of leisure activities, fun, and entertainment for youth as a significant risk factor. For example, Sonja says: "as far as adults, I think we have a pretty good; we're fortunate, I think. I think the youth have it a little harder. There's not a lot for them to do... if they don't have options, if they don't have good tools and support, then maybe it's easier for them to be steered in whatever direction." Tommy says, "they always say there is nothing to do here," admitting that for kids who are not interested in organized sports or hunting, that is true.

While participants discuss general vulnerabilities for youth, the female participants point out specific, gender-based risks for women. Ashlynn believes girls are more susceptible to negative influences because they tend to want to please others: "I want to say girls are definitely more vulnerable than boys, just given our personalities. I feel like girls just more want to be more accepted and are more willing to do things sometimes." This belief about internalized vulnerabilities, combines with the perception that there are external threats to women in southwestern North Dakota. Almost all of the female participants specifically remark that women should not go to Walmart alone. Others argue that young women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and sexual assault. One woman explains that amongst traffickers there is a perception that "the more rural you get, the better girls you get. The nicer, prettier ones…these girls are lonely, broken families, the parents aren't home." Another provides a frank, extended discussion of this gendered risk. In her sense-making, she teases apart risk and the perception of risk:

> *We're part of the Bakken Oilfield. So we have a lot of transient men that are coming here from all walks of life, and they're going out. And again we're objects. We are objects to these men. They have no ties to this community. They don't have to care about this community. Their wives or girlfriends aren't here. And they can treat us how they want. And they know that they're unidentifiable at this point. People don't know them because we have such a transient population. When I say transient, it's not like a homeless population. It's just they are not members of this community….and it's a large population. And when they get out of the oilfield, and they get off for the day, they're coming and they want sex. Or they want other things. And they're willing to do what they want for it.*
>
> *I think what is actually happening and the perception of safety are two different things. And so, although it's not happening a lot, I think that that perception is there. And it's a valid perception. It's absolutely a valid perception. Because we do have to worry about our safety. You have men that are significantly bigger than us. They are stronger than us. They work in the oilfields. They're having to lift heavy things all day long. And that's not what we do. And we will always be built differently. And so that perception that we're going to have regarding this transient population, these people we don't know, is definitely something that we're going to worry about.*
>
> *Now whether or not that's what is happening- do we have sexual assaults that are occurring with oilfield working? I don't necessarily think that we do. But it's not about what's actually happening. This is about perception. And if that's our perception, it's a valid perception to be concerned about. And I'm not saying we have to be concerned that that is going to happen. I think we have to be concerned that that is the perception. That women don't feel as safe because of whatever is going on in the community…Some of them are preying on vulnerable women, such as, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Please let me move in with you." And you have some pretty strong, independent women, and all of a sudden there's a man that's moving in, and we're just not thinking clearly. Because they're preying on our vulnerability. We thrive off of that acceptance, and being loved, and being cared for and cuddled with, and that touch. Those are love languages, and men sometimes prey on that. And these men are going to get what they want. All it takes is one time of that happening for us to think that it's happening all of the time.*

To summarize this section, in their discussions of vulnerability, participants disclose their opinions that families are foundational in shaping youth outcomes. In their experience, supportive families tend to increase successful outcomes, while "broken" or unsupportive families tend to increase vulnerability. In addition, vulnerable youths do not have readily available opportunities outside of the family or school to forge an identity, cultivate pro-social relationships, or gain a sense of accomplishment or empowerment. Finally, female respondents in this sample note gender-based vulnerabilities that they perceive to be unique to women in the region.

# PART IV: Next Steps

> **"Kids are not problems to be fixed. I stress that 120% all the time in all of my presentations. Kids just want to be heard. They want to be a part of their solution. They do want structure. They really do. They want opportunities to be heard and to understand what belonging and love looks like…Youth are the experts in their own lives."**
> **-Teresa**

At the outset of this project, 11 generous adults who work with youth provided insights into youth culture in southwestern North Dakota. These participants shared their time, experiences, and stories, to impart invaluable insights that will shape the future direction of this project. Respondents did not enter into these interviews with prepared talking points, but revealed thoughts and feelings that have been suffused with direct experiences and relationships with young people. On its surface, this report details how gender *still* matters for the youth in the community and gaps in young women's preparation for adulthood; on a deeper level, this report shows the passion of adults who advocate for youth and a community that deeply cares about its youth. This care is imperative in a world that has been profoundly changed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this time of uncertainty and heightened social, economic, and emotional challenges, the findings in this report take on new meaning. One of the most indispensable points in this report is the considerable need for more counseling, emotional support, and mental health services for young people. Now, only a few short weeks after the conclusion of interviews, this support is more critical than ever. The isolation of stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders may exacerbate preexisting mental health issues. It is likely that compulsory quarantine will heighten depression and anxiety and may challenge the emotional well-being of teens *without* mental health diagnoses; in addition, people may experience new barriers in obtaining needed medication and will likely be unable to access services from already-overburdened mental health providers. For students who tell teachers that "school is the best part of their day" (as Tommy reports), or who depend on free- or reduced-price meals at school, or who navigate learning disabilities, the transition to remote learning

practices presents new academic, emotional, and social challenges. In particular, new forms of economic inequality may be revealed in the community: who has consistent access to the internet, who can access digital support services like tele-counseling? The economic insecurity that colors the lives of some families in the region is likely to intensify and expand to previously financially-secure families. Perhaps most profoundly, young people may be prevented from seeing loved ones; or mourning deaths and unable to engage in collective rituals that help to ease the burden of loss. As this project moves forward, these issues should be of the utmost importance.

The long-term effects of COVID-19 are yet to be realized. However, it is likely that this pandemic will shape the lives of young people in pronounced ways. In considering economic opportunities for young women in the community, there may be a rise in the demand for healthcare and healthcare-adjacent workers. The caring professions, generally, are fields in which women tend to envision themselves and the proposed Career Academy may be uniquely positioned as a springboard that helps young women realize these opportunities.

In this final section, I offer comments—grounded in participant insights and sociological analysis—for consideration. I organize these remarks by time-frame: topics to consider in the immediate future, long-term considerations, and reflections on future iterations this project. I hope the serve as a starting point for fruitful conversations between board members, between the board and the community, and between all of us about the future directions of this project. In particular, I highly recommend applying for sustained funding that will help to maintain project momentum and participant engagement.

## Short-Term

**1.Report Summit.** It may be useful to institute a process whereby members of the board convene to discuss the findings of each phase of the research process with Dr. Hutchens. These conversations hold to potential to generate useful ideas and to shape future inquiries.

**2.Talking Points.** Generate talking points that summarize key findings to be discussed with community partners.

**3.Project Funding.** Identify potential sources of funding for future phases of this project.

**4.Funds for Elise.** Identify potential sources of funding to help Elise attend a crisis intervention training (including the **Bush Change Network Grant**).

## Long-Term

1. **Mental Health.** In alignment with prior inquires, participants identified mental health issues and a lack of mental health services as one of the primary issues facing youth in the community. **How might WEW assist in increasing mental health resources?**
2. **Empowered Technology.** Participants link mental health outcomes with technology and note a gendered difference in use. **How might WEW work with community partners to generate a training, tool, or program that helps to improve media literacy and empowered young women?**
3. **Families.** Participants identify families as foundational in shaping youth outcomes. **How might WEW engage with families?**
4. **Anti-Sexism Training.** Adults highlight the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes. **How might WEW generate and facilitate anti-sexism training** (as well as: anti-racism training)?
5. **Workshops and Mentoring.** Adults do not believe that young women are prepared for adult-level responsibilities. **How might WEW create and facilitate workshops that help young women (and families) understand issues like personal finance and/or initiate a mentorship network** that connects youth to women in the community represents a potentially powerful intervention.
6. **COVID-19 Support.** While the short-term and long-term outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic are emerging, **how might WEW can offer immediate or long-term support in the community?**

*Future research is dependent upon funding. The amount and timing of funding will largely determine what is possible future phases. In this section, I outline some potential ideas and proposals to be considered in subsequent phases of the project.*

1. **Expanded Adult Sample.** The issues Trinity Catholic School faces is likely distinctly different from the Dickinson Public School System. I propose that subsequent phases includes the recruitment and interviewing of participants that represent TCS, other facets of the homeschooling community, and community partners who work for youth-oriented organizations or who will partner with DPSS through the Career Academy. I propose increasing the adult sample to 20-25 participants.
2. **COVID-19.** I propose to expand the general inquiry (for both adults and youth) to specifically probe for COVID-19 impacts.
3. **Youth Recruitment.** Youth perspectives are imperative to this study. I envision youth recruitment occurring through school-based list-serves and contacts generated in this pilot. Recruitment can be used solely for interviews and focus groups through a short "Pre-screener" questionnaire in which participants answer and are selected for pre-determined variables we would like represented in the sample. However, with enough funding, we could also generate a larger survey that queries recent graduates and young men to generate a comparative sample (ie: comparing how young men and young women perceive gender stereotypes). While there are benefits and drawbacks to this approach, it would enable a mixed-methods approach.
4. **Interviews with Youth.** I propose a youth sample of 30-40 female participants. Youth will be invited to participate in one-on-one, in-depth interviews that focus on their perceptions of their opportunities, challenges, and readiness; the career academy; gender stereotypes and sexual double-standards; mental health issues and technology; their experiences with COVID-19; and their needs.
5. **Focus Groups.** I propose follow-up, solutions-oriented focus groups in the following areas: (1) youth-only focus groups (two groups of 5 to 10 participants); (2) adult 'influencer' focus groups (one group of 5-10 participants); and (3) parent focus groups (two groups of 5 to 10 parents of teens).
6. **Applied Problem-Solving.** This research intends to identify 'gaps' in young women's lives as a means to address and reduce systemic inequalities. Therefore, a key part of the research should include applied problem-solving that works to address at least one of these gaps to foster a more equitable community. I envision this process to be a part of the research summits with the WEW board.

# Appendix A: Interview Protocol

**WEW Phase I Interview Protocol:**
***Adult Educational Influencers***

*Given the nature of qualitative research, the interview questions will evolve modestly based on feedback from the field. Interviews will generally follow this script (including prompts) but also probe for depth and clarity, or explore different topics as the conversation unfolds in real time.*

## I. Consent to participate and record

- Review informed consent form
  - Q & A

## II. Introduction

Thank you again for agreeing to do this interview! Before we begin, I want to remind you that your participation is completely voluntary and that your interview answers are confidential. You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer and you may end the interview at any time. Additionally, if our conversation sparks thoughts or comments you would like to share after we conclude our interview, please don't hesitate to reach out—I would love to hear from you and to continue our conversation!

I want to remind you that I will be audio-recording the interview so that I don't miss anything you say. Is it ok to begin recording? Great, now I'm going to ask one more time just to get it on the record: "Is it ok to record this interview? [response] Thank you."

Getting started, my goal is to learn more about you and your experiences, especially as they relate to the education system and the opportunities and challenges facing young women here in Dickinson. One of the goals of this project is to better understand the community, so I want you to feel free to lay out whatever you have to say in your own way—no judgement, I'm all ears!

## III. Rapport Building: Background and Biography

Q[22]: To help me get some context, tell me a little bit about the big picture of your life.

P[23]: Family; work; living; hobbies; religion

P: How long have you lived in the area? Where did you grow up?

*PP[24]: If lived/worked elsewhere, will be useful to probe if alternative models exist later in interview.*

[22] "Q": Question

[23] "P": Probe

[24] "PP": Potential Probe

Q: Now, tell me more about yourself *as a person*. How would you describe your personality?

Q: What would you say is most important to you? Some people call this their "foundation"?

Q: What would you describe as some of your core values?
P: How do those values show up in your everyday life?
PP: [How] would your life be different if you removed [a part of your foundation/core]?

Q: How did you get into the field [of education]?
P: Do you remember when you first thought of becoming an educator?
P: Tell me a bit about your job.
P: How much contact do you have with students?
P: What are the most inspiring and challenging aspects of your job?
P: Walk me through a typical day.

Thank you for sharing with me a bit of your life! Now I'd like to talk with you more about your thoughts about the challenges and opportunities facing youth in this community. Many people have different opinions about it, but I'm curious to learn about what *you* think and feel. So please feel free to lay out whatever you have to say in your own way. And—just as a reminder—everything you share is completely confidential.

**IV. Understanding the System**

I grew up in Dickinson and was in the DPS system but, as a student, I wasn't familiar with how the system functioned or any of the conversations happening in the background.

Q: How would you describe the philosophy of [school]?
P: Do you think [school] is acting in accordance with that philosophy? How?

Q: What do you think are the biggest challenges faced by the school system?
P: Why?
P: How would you like to see this addressed?

Q: Do the schools in Dickinson collaborate with each other?
P: Do the schools collaborate with community organizations?
P: Do you see collaboration within [school]?

Q: Tell me about the proposed career academy model?
P: What are your thoughts on this model?

Q: Tell me about the success academy?
P: What are your thoughts on this model?

Q: Are there other educational models that you have seen?

Q: How many students are served by [DHS/THS/Homeschool/Hope Christian]?

P: Do you know roughly how many students at [school] qualify for free/reduced lunch?

**V. Contemporary Issues Facing Youth**

Now I have some questions regarding what you perceived to be some of the most prominent issues facing youth today. I first want to walk through some general questions and then move through some that will help me to understand better issues in the Dickinson community and how these issues may change according to gender, race, or class/socioeconomic standing.

Q: Before we get into a discussion of specific issues, I'm just curious as to how you would define a few general terms as to how they relate to youth:

P: What does empowerment that mean to you?

P: What does it mean to be empowered as a young person?

P: What does empowerment look like?

P: How would you define success for students in school?

P: What does success look like after graduation?

PP: Do you think that empowerment and success are things that change throughout our lives?

PP: Do you notice any trends in students who are successful outside of school?

P: Personal traits; external factors like family support

P: So we've talked about success and empowerment. But I'm also curious about the flip-side, and thinking about "vulnerable" or at-risk students. How would you define what it means to be a "vulnerable" or at-risk student?

PP: What factors make these students "vulnerable"?

PP: Do you notice any trends in students who are "vulnerable"?

Q: Within the school system, who [what roles] tend(s) to have the most influence in students' lives?

P: How do you notice this influence?

P: Why do you think [they] are so influential?

P: Do you notice different influences for women and men?

PP: How/Why?

P: Do you notice different influences for your students of color?

P: Do you notice different influences for your students based on their family's income or class? [M*ay define class here as access to various forms of cultural capital (ex:FAFSA)]*

Q: What do you think are some of the biggest challenges faced by youth in Dickinson today?

P: Is this unique to Dickinson? [PP: oil impact]

P: Have these changed over time?

Q: What do you think are some of the greatest opportunities?

P: Is this unique to Dickinson? [PP: oil impact]

P: Have these changed over time?

Q: Do you think that these challenges and opportunities are different for young women and young men?

P: How/Why?
P: "Vulnerable" students?
P: Students of color?

Q: Do you think students are aware of these challenges and opportunities?

P: Do you think stereotypes influence how students think about their opportunities? For example, do stereotypes about what it means to be a man or woman influence their decision making? Do you think this is changing? How?

**VI. Preparation and Prior Inquiries**

Thank you for all that insight. Now that we've talked about some of the issues facing youth and young women, in particular, I would love to hear your thoughts about potential solutions and current programs (or lack thereof) in place that influence those challenges and opportunities.

Q: Given these issues [provide specific examples], do you think [school] is adequately preparing students for these challenges and opportunities, post-high school?

P: How?
P: Why is this important?
P: How does this help young women become "empowered"? [prompt R definition]
P: How does this help guide young women toward "success"? [prompt R definition]
P: How do you specifically try to connect young women to resources that will foster empowerment or success?
P: Do you do anything specific for vulnerable students?
PP: why/why not?
PP: Is this an institutional or individual effort?

Q: What do you think is missing in this preparation? In other words, do you see any gaps?

P: Why is this important?

Q: What do you think are the most important ways in which we can prepare youth for life outside of school?

P: Do you think this is the same for young women and young men?
P: Vulnerable students?
P: Students of color?
P: Do you think this applies to students across the United States? Is there something unique about being a young person in North Dakota or even Dickinson that necessitates a different sort of preparation?

Q: In thinking specifically about young women *after* they graduate from high school:

P: Do you think they understand personal finance?

P: Do you think they have the resources to make the sexual and reproductive health choices they want?

PP: Tell me a bit about sexual education curriculum currently in use.

P: Do you think young women leave high school feeling media literate?

P: Do you think young women leave high school knowing how to access mental health resources?

P: Do you think they leave high school knowing how to access and navigate other physical health resources?

P: Do young women tend to stay in the community?

P: Do young women have a desire to leave the community?

P: Do you think those that choose to attend post-secondary education are prepared?

P: Do you think those that choose to enter the work-force are prepared?

PP: Do these women have the opportunity to obtain jobs that pay more than minimum wage or that offer benefits?

P: Do you think that the oil industry has a unique impact on young women in our community?

PP: How do you see this?

PP: Why do you think this occurs?

Q: How do you talk about students about their post-high school options?

Q: Are there any other community organizations or actors that you know are working to support young women, outside of the school system?

Q: Are you tracking student outcomes or getting any sort of feedback from graduates?

P: Have or are any studies being conducted to help you better understand student needs?

PP: Would tracking outcomes be useful?

PP: What sort of information would be useful in understanding how [school] is serving students?

**VII. Additional Perspectives, Comments, and Interview Reflections**

I've asked you so many questions—thank you for your patience and willingness to talk through these ideas with me! However, I want to acknowledge that sometimes I don't always ask the *right* questions.

Q: Is there anything else that you'd like to add or to clarify that you think would help us to better understand the school system or needs that you believe are currently unmet?

P: Is there any information that would be useful for us to provide you?

P: We plan to conduct interviews with 30 young women and potentially follow-up one-on-one interviews with a focus group. What questions would you like to ask these young women?

Q: How are you feeling about the interview, itself? Are there any comments or thoughts you'd like to share about the questions we are asking or our project?

**VIII. Closing + Recruitment**

Q: Thank you again for your time! We have completed our interview, but as we continue this project, we are looking for more adult 'influencers' in the education system to participate in interviews. Is there anyone that comes to mind for you, that may be interested and willing to be interviewed?

P: We plan to talk to counselors, board members, etc, who else should we reach out to?

Q: As we move into the second phase of our research, we will be conducting interviews with young women. While I intend to distribute a survey to recruit folks, are there any young women that come to mind that you think I should talk to?

P: Groups?

P: School listserve?

Q: We may also conduct follow-up focus groups with folks in the education system. If we do so, would you be interested in participating?

PP: May I contact you in the future? [Complete contact form]

- *Remember to leave R with a copy of consent form at the end of the interview*
- *Remember to have R complete follow-up contact form*
- *Remind R to contact me if they have any further questions or comments, or if they would like to recommend another potential R*
- *Complete Post-Interview Checklist and Reflection within 24 hours*