

Making a Path to Tech Careers More Salient

ideas **42**



Prompting young adults to consider tech certification with Per Scholas

Per Scholas offers quick, tuition-free access to highly regarded hands-on job training and certification for adults of all ages, specifically those underrepresented in the tech sector. However, few young adults consider this promising option to launch their postsecondary education and work experience. ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center and Per Scholas's Youth Career Pathways partnered to design behaviorally informed communication content and outreach strategies to engage high school students and recent high school graduates.

Summary

The tech industry offers numerous opportunities for lucrative, secure, and engaging jobs in a sector that is expected to continue to grow and expand in the coming years. However, women and people of color are underrepresented in this growing field.¹ Per Scholas is a non-profit organization that engages leading employers, large and small, in developing a cutting-edge curriculum to equip its students with today's most sought-after industry knowledge and skills. The organization is dedicated to reducing barriers for women and people of color with low incomes, groups underrepresented in IT employment today.

Per Scholas offers a variety of technical certification courses—such as cloud network support, cybersecurity, and software engineering—that students can choose from. These courses are offered remotely and at two New York City locations—South Bronx and Brooklyn—as well as 14 locations across the U.S. Each course provides hands-on technical training and education and professional development coaching, equipping students to land their first job in tech and move up the career ladder. Approximately 85% of Per Scholas students complete the program and qualify for entry to mid-level tech roles in a wide variety of fields. Within the first year of graduation, alumni earn an average of \$42,000 a year, often much more.

However, most of Per Scholas's applicants applied to the training courses in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties after changing careers or educational tracks. Few young adults aged 18 to 24 applied. Yet building tech skills and getting started in the industry at a younger age means an earlier start to career advancement and earnings. Per Scholas's Youth Career Pathways (YCP) partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to learn more about barriers to intention formation and applying among people in this age group who are interested in working in tech, and identify ways to encourage more young adults to consider Per Scholas.

Highlights

- ▶ While Per Scholas' tech training has benefits for all adults, few young adults applied to it.
- ▶ Understanding barriers applicants face helps identify behavioral solutions to help increase exposure and enrollment.
- ▶ Messaging, coaching, and materials tailored for high school students can help more people from underrepresented backgrounds get started in tech careers.

¹ <https://www.wired.com/story/computer-science-graduates-diversity/>

Our approach

In order to learn more about how young adults make choices about their post-high school education and work options, the BDC participated in online workshops and trainings that the YCP offers to inform high school students about Per Scholas and jobs in tech. We spoke with several workshop participants attending high schools in the South Bronx and Brooklyn to learn about how they became interested in technology and their post-high school graduation plans. We also spoke with several young adults who had graduated high school or completed their GED about their interest in Per Scholas, technology, and tech careers, and to gain insights into how the YCP team might better capture the attention of their peers who haven't yet considered tech as a career path.

In addition, we spoke with four counselors from three high school programs in the Bronx to understand how they support high school students in making post-graduation work and education choices. From these conversations, we learned about the situational factors that influence students' post-graduation plans, as well as some of the hurdles that might prevent young adults from considering Per Scholas.

Finally, we did an audit of Per Scholas's existing outreach materials and strategies to understand how the team has been engaging young adults to date. We also learned about the application process, and how it compares to the processes for other options in a young adult's choice set—such as community college or entry-level jobs.

What we found

The main behavioral barriers—psychological and contextual factors—that may keep young adults from applying and registering for Per Scholas's tech certification courses include:

- 1. Social Norms and Influence**—There is a social norm and expectation that high school graduates will pursue the traditional college route, making students less likely to learn about and consider a technical training program like Per Scholas. This norm, often articulated or reinforced by high school administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, classmates, media, and other societal influencers, creates a mindset that one should pursue the traditional college track.
- 2. Present Bias and Planning Fallacy**—Young adults, especially high school students, may be especially susceptible to focusing on short-term benefits rather than longer-term gains. Even if a career in tech could result in higher income in the long term than other entry level positions, enrolling in a 4-5-month program can feel like a delay in getting a job and earning an immediate income.
- 3. Risk and Ambiguity Aversion**—Per Scholas is a rigorous program and it's not immediately clear to prospective applicants what skills and knowledge are needed before enrolling. Because of this, high school and workforce development counselors are sometimes hesitant to suggest the program to their students if they aren't sure they can handle it. Additionally, counselors and prospective students may not understand what each certification course entails, or if they qualify.

And for high school students who aren't entirely sure of their career paths and aren't familiar with tech vernacular, the current Per Scholas program descriptions may not resonate with them and the way they think about the tech field. In the absence of concrete examples of what Per Scholas graduates end up doing (and where), they may have a hard time imagining themselves in the program and their future job prospects.

- 4. Stereotyping and Identity Conflicts**—Our conversations with high school students and recent high school graduates from the Bronx revealed that the identities of these young adults may not align with their perception of who works in technology. Some young adults may believe that they aren't Per Scholas material, either because they did not do well in attendance or academics in high school, or do not have the maturity, or a flexible enough schedule, to make it through the program. Or they may be influenced by perceptions of societal views that don't associate tech careers with people of their race, socioeconomic status, or gender.

These situational and behavioral barriers are likely keeping many high school students and recent graduates interested in pursuing tech work from considering Per Scholas despite the advantages of its short-term, tuition-free program and record of successful alumni outcomes.

Recommendations and messaging solutions

The Behavioral Design Center offered a series of recommendations to help Per Scholas's Youth Career Pathways team heighten awareness of the program, and address each of the common barriers:

1. Increase Per Scholas's visibility among high school students, young adults, and their counselors by creating targeted informational materials that feature a diverse array of Per Scholas students and alumni, and offering regular informational sessions and a designated youth staff liaison for them.
2. Prompt and support student planning by providing materials and hands-on coaching that help them set clear goals, understand how Per Scholas's short-term programs can help them achieve those goals, and develop concrete, step-by-step plans to prepare for and apply to one of the certification programs.
3. Reduce ambiguity and hassles by making the course offerings clearer and the application easier to complete. Provide high school and youth program counselors with tailored resources—such as booklets, pamphlets, application roadmaps, and online video content—that describe Per Scholas programs in lay language, in ways that resonate with this age group and answer common questions.
4. Help young people form a positive mindset about the tech field and their potential place within it by showcasing the wide variety of individuals among current Per Scholas students and alumni, as well the broader field, and incorporating testimonials from them in communication materials.

In addition to these recommendations, the BDC provided a stream of email and text message content for initial outreach and sustained communication with young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, designed to mitigate the barriers above. We also suggested ways to use similar message content in other communication materials and channels, including printed course catalogs, one-pagers, and brochures for dissemination by high school counselors, youth and workforce development programs, and community college career offices.

What's next

Per Scholas has begun incorporating our sample messages and drawing on our recommendations to shape new communications, including promotional materials and digital language, to better connect with 18 to 24-year-olds. Additionally, Per Scholas is revising its Technology Career Exploration Program (TCEP) resources to include a planning guide to help students consider all their postsecondary education options, create an intention, and then take the steps to learn more or apply to Per Scholas.

In the words of Per Scholas's YCP Manager, Jorge Correa: "The most helpful things we learned and are using from this project are the motivating factors that either do or do not exist for our target audience, the language they are more likely to respond to, and the need they have [for support in] forming an intention [about career options]." Thus, the new planning guide will provide links to online resources and information about technology careers and training opportunities. It will also present a series of activities that high school students can do with or without the guidance of a counselor to help them determine whether they want to pursue work in tech. If they do, the activities in the guide will help students produce an individualized action plan and checklist focused on the key steps they will take to prepare for Per Scholas and secure their first job in technology.

Per Scholas is already applying these behavioral insights to reach more young people, particularly women and people of color, and prompt them to consider a wider range of career possibilities after high school. Equipping even more people with essential tech skills can help them land a job and advance their careers and incomes, potentially improving earnings and well-being.

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