

Workforce of the Future: The Next Generation's Blueprint for San Antonio

Written By Isabella Alvarado, Savannah Rakowitz, Jessy Rugeyo

Design By Jonathon Rodriguez



Introduction

San Antonio is a city defined by its rich culture, vibrant community, and numerous opportunities. Alongside a thriving culinary scene, nationally recognized programs like Ready to Work and Pre-K 4 SA, and a wave of new urban development projects, the city offers both a high quality of life and a deep sense of identity. Looking ahead, San Antonio is also expecting an increase of 1.1 million new residents by 2040¹ and a rapid population influx from 5.2 million to 8.3 million by 2050². And yet, despite these strengths and an exciting period of growth, San Antonio remains

¹ Bednarz, S. (2022, April 14). *Booming Population Growth for the Alamo City*. ECR. <https://www.ecrtx.com/news/booming-population-growth-for-the-alamo-city/>

² Pandey, M. (2023, November 9). *Texas is not prepared for Austin-San Antonio population boom, experts say*. The Texas Tribune. <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/11/09/san-antonio-austin-growth-development/>

what many call a “boomerang city,” a place where young people often leave in search of greater opportunity, career growth, or cultural variety, only to return later in life, often for affordability or proximity to family.

This pattern raises a fundamental question: **What would it take for young people to stay in the first place? And just as important, how can the city attract new talent from beyond San Antonio to plant roots here?**

As San Antonio continues to grow and diversify, retaining emerging talent is essential to the city’s long-term economic resilience and competitiveness. But to design policies that both *retain* and *attract* young professionals, we must first understand what they value. What draws them to a city? What do they expect from employers? How do they define opportunity, and what infrastructure supports the lives they want to build?

To begin answering these questions, the Better Futures Institute launched its inaugural ***Workforce of the Future: Policy and Civic Lab***, a hands-on, student-centered summit designed to surface the priorities, frustrations, and ideas of San Antonio’s next generation of leaders. Hosted at the University of Texas at San Antonio’s School of Data Science, the event brought together over 150 high school and college students, interns, and industry professionals for a day of collaborative workshops, civic dialogue, and peer-to-peer learning. It offered students a seat at the table to articulate the conditions they need to thrive at work, in the city, and in life.

The *Workforce of the Future* Initiative marks the beginning of a larger series hosted by the Better Futures Institute across South Texas. Our goal is to bridge the gap between emerging talent, employers, and policymakers and ensure that the future of San Antonio is built in partnership with the generation that will inherit it.

The Better Futures Institute: Our Story

Founded in 2023, the Better Futures Institute (BFI) is a civic tech nonprofit dedicated to shaping a thriving, equitable, and resilient future for San Antonio and the South Texas Triangle. Our mission is grounded in three pillars: research, talent development, and storytelling.

At the heart of our efforts is the [Civic Tech Scholars](#), a talent development program that provides college students with hands-on experience at the intersection of data science, policy design, software development, and community-based research. Through this initiative, young people explore how digital tools can improve civic life and support smarter, more inclusive urban planning.

The *Workforce of the Future* event was a direct extension of this mission. After several months of roundtable discussions with city stakeholders around workforce gaps and urban development, BFI brought high school and college students into the conversation to elevate their perspectives

and ideas. Their insights will inform future engagements with employers, city agencies, and community leaders as we work to align local workforce strategies with the priorities of young people.

By strengthening the pipeline between students, employers, and policymakers, BFI aims to ensure that San Antonio not only attracts top talent but also inspires young residents to build their lives and careers here.

Methodology



On July 9, 2025, more than 100 college and high school students interning across San Antonio gathered at the University of Texas at San Antonio's School of Data Science for a full day of civic dialogue, collaborative learning, and professional development.

The event opened with welcoming remarks from Better Futures Institute CEO, Dr. Alberto Gómez, followed by a keynote address from Bexar County Judge Peter Sakai, who reflected on his journey and encouraged students to lead with humility and determination. Beto Altamirano, CEO of Irys Technologies, delivered a keynote on innovation, civic responsibility, and the future of work in South Texas.

Following the keynotes, students participated in a live panel discussion featuring industry professionals from across sectors such as workforce development, entrepreneurship and

placemaking, and public service. Panelists included Tiana Carter, USAA Assistant Vice President of Human Resources; Andres Andujar, Former CEO of Hemisfair Park Area Redevelopment Corporation; Romanita Matta-Barrera, Chief Business Advancement Officer for greater:SATX; and Roberto Rios, Senior Human Resources, Toyota Motor Manufacturing. The discussion centered on San Antonio's economic trajectory, the evolving nature of work, and the shared responsibility of preparing the next generation for meaningful careers.

In the afternoon, students joined small-group mentorship roundtables with 30 local professionals from fields including education, finance, law, healthcare, and technology. These roundtables offered students the opportunity to engage directly with mentors in an informal setting, ask questions about career pathways, and receive guidance on entering the local job market.

To better understand student experiences and priorities, BFI designed a series of interactive, mixed-method activities that produced both qualitative and quantitative insights. These included:

- **Priority Cards:** Students ranked 10 factors that influence where they choose to live and work, including cost of living, public transportation, and career growth.
- **Six-Word Cards:** Students described their ideal city or workplace in six words, surfacing key emotional and practical values.
- **Career Interest Board:** Students placed stickers indicating the industries they hope to enter after graduation.
- **Big Idea Workshop:** In small groups, students identified local challenges, brainstormed solutions, and presented a collective "big idea" with a value proposition and target audience.
- **Mentor Roundtables:** Students participated in guided small-group discussions with local professionals across industries to explore career opportunities, job readiness, and mentorship.

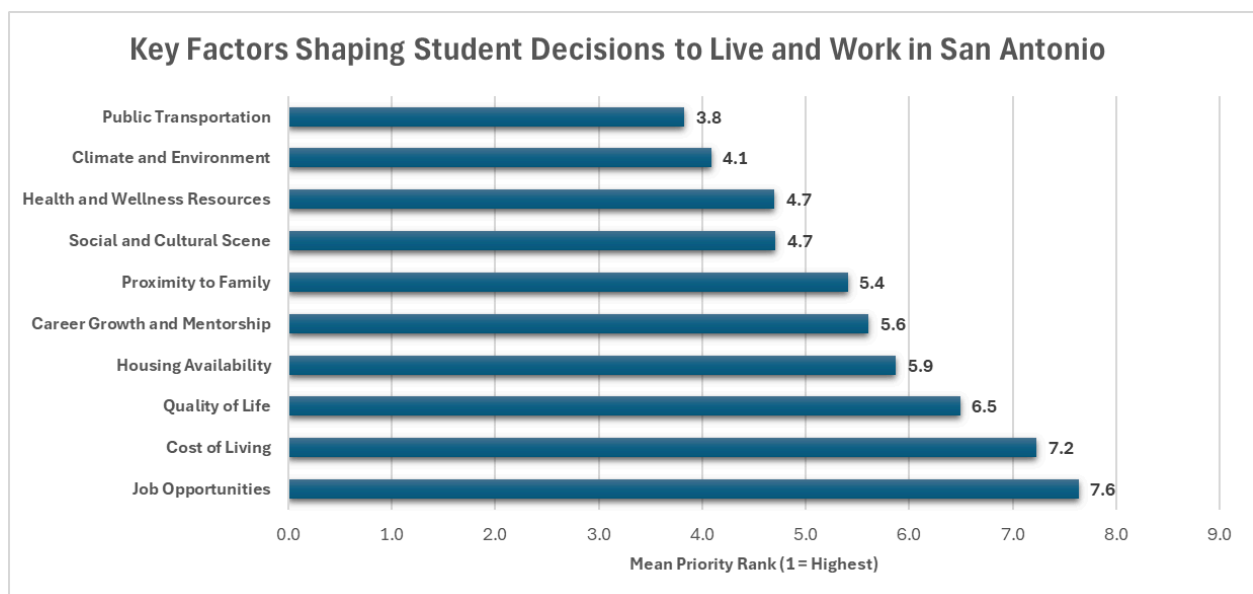
All sessions were facilitated by Paola Fernandez, Director of Urban Planning at the Urban Alchemy Collective, alongside BFI Civic Tech Scholars. Responses and materials were collected on-site for post-event analysis and integration into this report.

Findings



Top Priorities for Young Talent

One of the central exercises of the Civic Lab was the Priority Matrix, in which participants ranked the key factors influencing their decisions about where to live and work. Each student rated 10 categories on a scale from one (most important) to 10 (least important), offering insight into how young people assess quality of life and career potential.



Across the board, students emphasized economic concerns—particularly job availability and affordability—as the most critical factors shaping their post-graduation decisions. Over 28% of participants identified job opportunities as their number one priority, while nearly one in five ranked cost of living highest. These findings point to a broader desire for stability, autonomy, and long-term growth within the communities where students hope to build their futures.

Qualitative feedback further reinforced this theme:

“Cost of living dictates many other environmental factors. You need to be able to support yourself financially to allow for true freedom and opportunity.”

“Job opportunities will dictate a lot of the other priorities I have.”

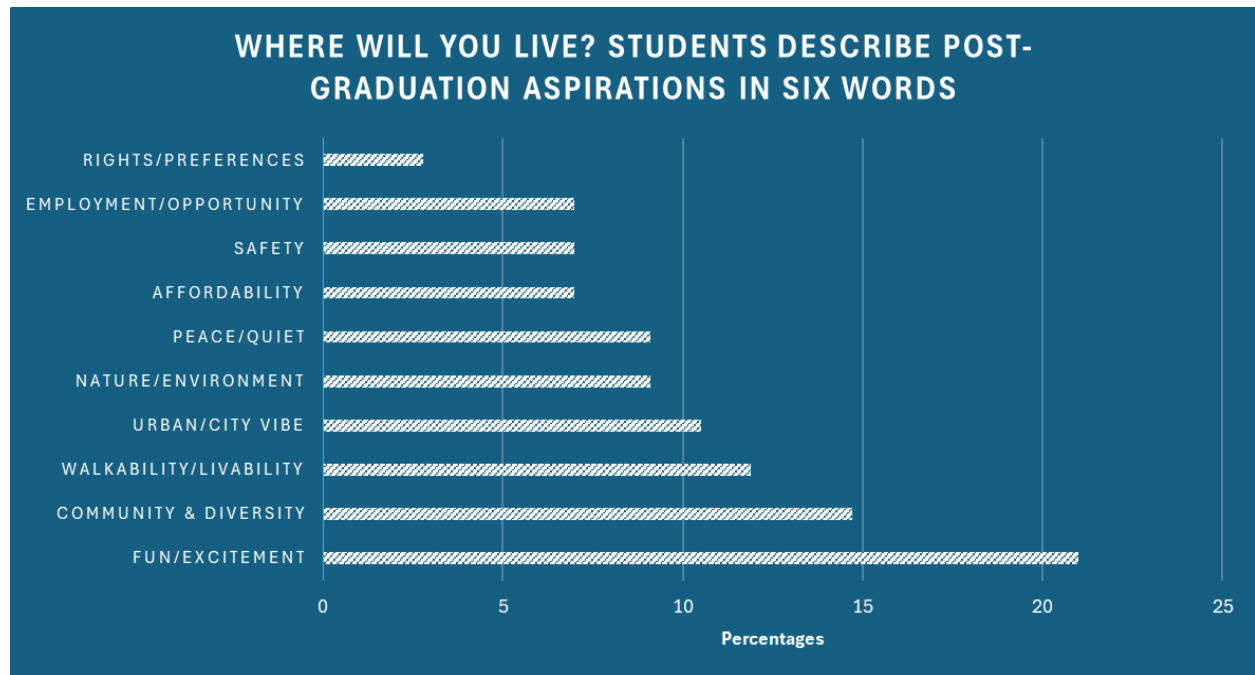
“I want to live well while I work well.”

Interestingly, while amenities like public transportation and social infrastructure ranked lower overall, many students acknowledged their long-term value. Their lower prioritization in this setting may reflect the urgency of immediate financial security, but not a lack of interest:

“I’m not someone who can live somewhere boring just because it’s cheap.”

This tension suggests a need for cities to balance economic accessibility with investments in public assets that support a sense of belonging, creativity, and quality of life.

Six-Word Cards



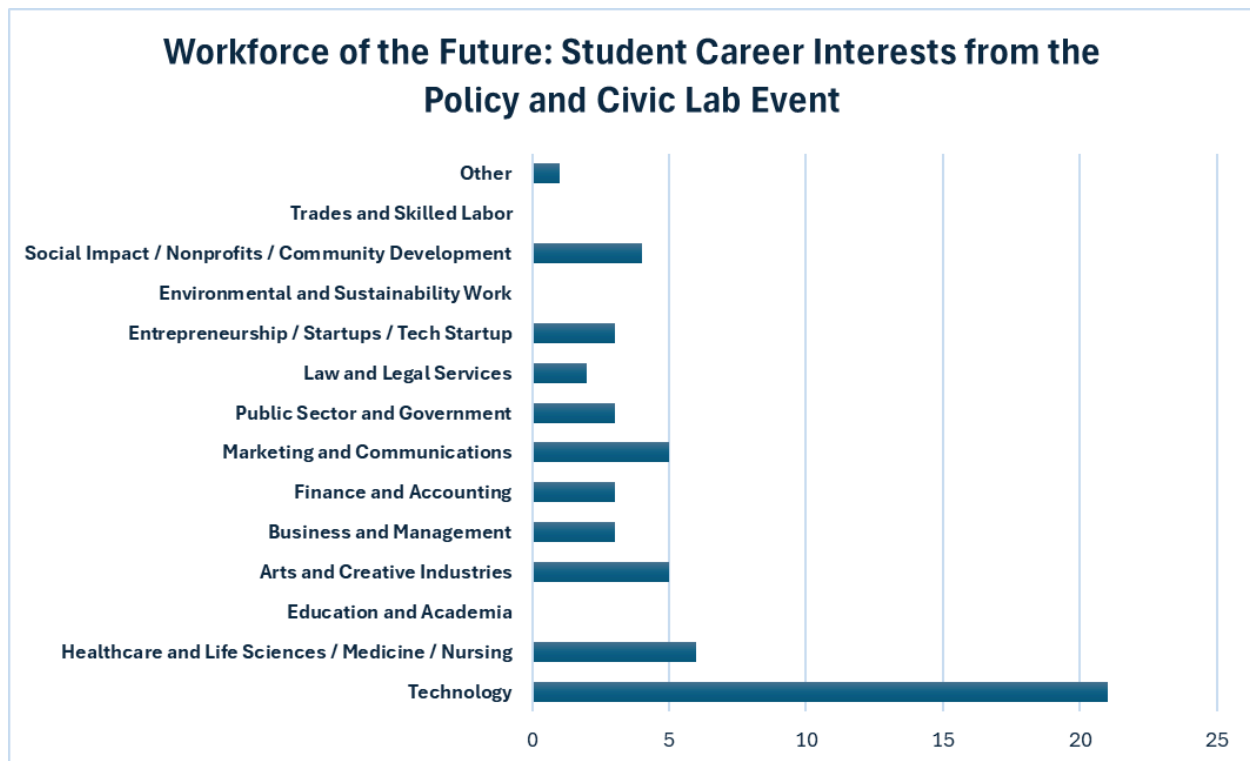
To explore students' emotional and aspirational visions of life after graduation, participants were invited to describe their ideal city or workplace in exactly six words. This creative prompt surfaced both practical concerns and deeper values, revealing a balance between professional ambition and quality of life.

The most common themes included:

- Fun and Excitement
- Community and Diversity
- Affordability and Safety
- Opportunity and Innovation

Students expressed a desire to live in places that feel dynamic, welcoming, and secure. Even as job access and cost of living remained top concerns, many students emphasized the importance of identity, culture, and joy in their future environments. These responses highlighted that economic opportunity and personal fulfillment are not mutually exclusive, but rather deeply intertwined in shaping where young people choose to live, work, and play.

Career Interests



When asked to share their intended career paths, more than 38% of students expressed interest in technology fields, followed by healthcare, life sciences, and the creative arts. This suggests a growing demand for high-skill, high-growth industries in the San Antonio region, which are increasingly central to the city's economic development strategy.

However, it is important to note that many participants were part of Students + Startups, a local internship program that places students in tech-focused roles. As such, there may be a sample bias that skews the data toward technology-related interests. A broader and more demographically diverse cohort might yield a wider range of career aspirations.

Big Ideas from Students

During the Big Idea Workshop, students and interns collectively determined current challenges within San Antonio involving workforce development, urban, and economic issues, solutions to those challenges, and products that could be integrated into city policy.

Recurring concerns included the high cost of living, a lack of affordable housing, limited access to public transportation, and insufficient job opportunities. Despite these systemic barriers, students approached the exercise with optimism and ambition. Highlights included:

- A rent-to-buy housing program designed to help young residents build equity and remain in San Antonio
- A downtown light rail system to improve urban mobility and reduce car dependency
- Worker protection campaigns and clear standards for internship compensation and transparency
- A centralized local directory connecting residents to job openings, mentorship opportunities, and training resources
- Expansion of remote work and flexible scheduling options across sectors
- A public directory of transportation options to help residents better navigate existing systems

One group introduced the term “*civic altruism*”—a public philosophy grounded in mutual responsibility and community care. They called for a cultural shift that embraces this mindset, especially within city government and local institutions. This idea reflected a broader belief among participants that policy must be people-centered and rooted in true collective well-being.

A key theme that emerged across nearly all proposals was **collaboration**. Many groups emphasized the importance of mentorship, envisioning structured programs that connect students and early-career professionals with local employers and community organizations. Participants cited a strong need for more opportunities to network locally and build relationships that support a smooth transition from education to employment. In their view, a thriving workforce ecosystem is not just about job creation, but about fostering the networks, systems, and support structures that allow young people to get their “foot in the door.”

Event Takeaways

The *Workforce of the Future: Policy & Civic Lab* revealed four key insights that not only reflect what young people prioritize but also how they envision their role in shaping the future of San Antonio:

1. **Economic security is non-negotiable.**
Students are not just looking for jobs; they are seeking stability, independence, and a clear path for long-term growth. Cost of living and job availability emerged as the most important factors influencing whether they choose to remain in San Antonio after graduation.
2. **A sense of joy and belonging matters.**
While financial concerns dominated early conversations, students also emphasized the importance of vibrant, inclusive communities. They want to live in cities that reflect their identities and values, with access to cultural spaces, green areas, and a shared sense of community. These needs become even more important once economic stability is established.

3. **Mentorship and transparency make a difference.**

Students valued the opportunity to speak directly with professionals in small-group settings. They expressed a need for clear expectations in the workplace, inclusive hiring practices, and accessible pathways into long-term employment. Mentorship was seen as a core pillar of a strong workforce ecosystem.

4. **Young people want a seat at the table.**

Many of the most thoughtful ideas that surfaced during the Civic Lab—such as data transparency in housing, flexible work policies, and civic mentorship initiatives—reflect a desire for long-term investment and systems-level change. Students are eager to contribute to the city’s growth and identity, but they need leaders to recognize their input as valuable.

These takeaways also point to a broader reality: recent graduates are entering the workforce at a time of significant economic instability, and it would be incomplete to reflect on their experiences without acknowledging this. As of March 2025, the unemployment rate for new college graduates reached 5.8%, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, well above the national average and the ideal rate for a healthy job market³. With the rise of artificial intelligence shrinking the number of traditional entry-level roles, today’s graduates face some of the steepest employment barriers in over a decade⁴.

Compared to other groups in the workforce, **current graduates are encountering greater difficulty securing stable employment**⁵. These challenges were echoed throughout the Civic Lab, where students shared both personal frustrations and concrete ideas for a more supportive path forward.

Attendees shared these sentiments in a post-event survey when asked if they believe AI will help or hurt their chances of finding a good job in the future. A resounding 40.9% were unsure of whether AI would assist or hurt their chances, while 31.8% were sure it would assist them. Only 4.5% noted that AI would hurt their chances of earning an entry-level job. Concerns students shared included that “they will replace starting positions” and that “AI can be too trusted.” A common theme amongst respondents included a concern of “laziness” – people not thinking

³Federal Reserve Bank of New York. (2025, February 20). *The Labor Market for Recent College Graduates*. [www.newyorkfed.org](https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market#:~:explore=unemployment). <https://www.newyorkfed.org/research/college-labor-market#:~:explore=unemployment>

⁴ Werner, J. (2025, June). *AI May Be Erasing Entry-Level Jobs*. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnwerner/2025/06/01/ai-may-be-erasing-entry-level-jobs/>

⁵ Associated Press (2025, June 26). *The unemployment rate for young college graduates worries many economists*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/college-graduates-job-market-unemployment-c5e881d0a5c069de08085a47fa58f90f>

creatively outside of what AI presents to them – and that design positions will be strictly done by AI, without the human touch.

Their perspectives reveal **an urgent need for systems that integrate AI education with pathways to opportunity and lasting economic stability.**

Next Steps for San Antonio

The *Workforce of the Future* event surfaced a clear theme: young people in San Antonio are driven by job stability and long-term career potential when choosing where to live. Their top consideration is not lifestyle amenities or urban style, but whether a city offers meaningful work and room to grow.

This aligns with international research in other cities. In Montreal, Sébastien Darchen and Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay found that professional opportunities and access to strong networks were the primary drivers of student retention in science and technology fields, far outweighing the influence of urban amenities. In Seoul, researcher Song Hee Kang observed that while job access remained central, certain life-stage factors such as education and green space began to matter more as residents aged. Both cases reinforce the idea that cities must focus on job quality and career pathways if they want to retain young talent.

Participants at *Workforce of the Future* echoed these global findings. For them, job access was the defining factor in their decision to stay in San Antonio. Amenities, while appreciated, were secondary to economic security and mobility. Despite the importance of this topic, there is little localized research capturing the workforce development needs of San Antonio's youth. The *Workforce of the Future* event catalyzed addressing that gap and advancing local dialogue on youth workforce needs.

The city has already taken meaningful steps to ramp up the quality of its workforce through programs like **SA Ready to Work**, a city-led initiative that provides education and job training to help residents access better-paying careers.. As of 2023, the program served more than 3,000 participants and generated \$1.7 billion in local economic impact⁶. Still, much of the job growth it supports has been concentrated in sectors like construction, hospitality, and healthcare, while areas such as professional services, government, and transportation remain underemphasized. This misalignment reflects concerns raised by students who hope to build careers in high-skill fields.

⁶ *Return on Investment Study Reveals Ready to Work Program Impact.* (2025). Sa.gov.
<https://www.sa.gov/Directory/News-Releases/Return-on-Investment-Study-Reveals-Ready-to-Work-Program-Impact>

To strengthen San Antonio's ability to retain young professionals, we recommend the following steps:

- **Create a citywide mentorship program** to connect students and early-career professionals with leaders across industries
- **Develop a centralized, accessible job board** with a focus on public, private, and nonprofit entry-level roles.
- **Expand affordable housing options** near the urban core to support young professionals with better access to jobs, transit, and vibrant neighborhoods.
- **Broaden SA Ready to Work** to include training and career navigation tools tailored to recent graduates and early-career workers.

Young people are seeking cities that meet them where they are. If San Antonio wants to retain its emerging talent, it must prioritize not only job creation but job visibility, access, and mentorship.

City Comparisons

Other cities across the United States have adopted similar solutions to those presented by the attendees of the *Workforce of the Future*.

Austin, Texas

Austin has successfully employed a sector strategy in the technology industry, led by Workforce Solutions Capital Area, the Austin Technology Council, the City's Economic Development Department, and the Texas Workforce Commission⁷. In 2019, these partners commissioned research to align employer demand for IT roles with local training program supply, identifying skill gaps, particularly at the middle-skill technician level. This resulted in targeted training programs that significantly reduced gaps between educational outcomes and employer needs.

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore has also piloted several youth workforce development initiatives, including YouthWorks, a job matching program for teens and young adults in private, nonprofit, and city and state government sectors⁸. The town additionally runs the Job Training for Youth program,

⁷ Alexander Research & Consulting. (2020, June). AUSTIN AREA TECHNOLOGY TALENT: LABOR MARKET STUDY AND STRATEGY. Retrieved from Alexander Research & Consulting: <https://www.wfscapitalarea.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Austin-Area-IT-Talent-Report.pdf>

⁸ *Youth Services*. (2015, October 23). Mayor's Office of Employment Development. <https://moed.baltimorecity.gov/youth-services>

career prep classes for older teens and young adults, YH20 – a career mentoring program between unemployed Baltimore residents and established professionals – and Grads2Careers, a free job training program to prepare youth for employment in well-paying, high-demand careers.

Denver, Colorado

In Denver, the city launched the Denver Youth Employment Program (DYEP) that provided youth access to workforce development, career exposure, and local job opportunities⁹. Participants receive Job Readiness Training (JRT) and Financial Literacy Training before their work experience to gain the tools needed to succeed within the city.

Next Steps for the Better Futures Institute



The *Workforce of the Future* event was more than just a one-day summit. It marked the beginning of a sustained effort to reshape how cities engage young residents in workforce and community development.

Moving forward, BFI will expand on this momentum in various ways:

⁹ *Career & College Success*. (2025). Dpsk12.org. <https://ccs.dpsk12.org/page/summer-youth-employment>

Advance Industry Research. Engage local businesses, industry professionals, and policymakers with parallel events to better understand what they seek in new talent and how multi-sector institutions can better support their workforce needs.

Expand the civic lab model across the South Texas Triangle. Building on the momentum from San Antonio, future events will be hosted in Laredo, Brownsville, and Corpus Christi—three cities critical to the region’s growth and workforce landscape. These labs will reflect the diversity of the South Texas experience and help identify region-wide solutions.

Share Findings with Regional Stakeholders. BFI will deliver presentations and workshops to city agencies, educational institutions, and industry groups to ensure that insights from young people are embedded into long-term planning. This will include a public dashboard to make data from the civic labs transparent and accessible.

Continue Supporting Year-Round Programming for Civic Tech Scholars. In addition to these larger events, BFI will continue to invest in emerging leaders through skills-building, mentorship, and real-world policy engagement throughout the year.

As BFI continues to grow, our mission remains focused: to advance a culture of innovation and support workforce development by providing opportunities for the next generation to reach their full potential. We are equally committed to supporting communities across South Texas and enhancing the quality of life for all. The *Workforce of the Future* initiative represents the foundation of a long-term commitment to economic mobility, talent retention, and regional collaboration. It is only the beginning.



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