

# Transitioning to a Professional Role as a Person with Lived Experience



The JEAP Initiative is a project funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse that aims to advance research on recovery support services, especially for young adults and adults with criminal legal system involvement.

Three Community Boards guide our work. These Boards are comprised of young adults in recovery from substance use, adults in recovery who also have prior criminal legal system involvement, and providers and payors of recovery support services. Our partnership is driven by the belief that bringing together research expertise and people with lived experience will produce more powerful research results.

**QUESTION:** How can an individual with lived experience (in recovery and/or with the criminal legal system) successfully transition into a professional role?

This question arose as a topic of interest through collaboration with the Community Boards. We created a set of questions to 'crowdsource' advice from individuals with lived experience who have made this transition.

In order to invite individuals with lived experience to share their advice with others via this survey, a number of well-established organizations helped us get the word out, including Prison to Professionals (P2P), the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network (FICGN), the California State University Project Rebound network, Just Leadership USA (JLUSA), and many others. These organizations have broad networks of diverse individuals who have worked through substance use disorders and/or have been impacted by the criminal legal system.

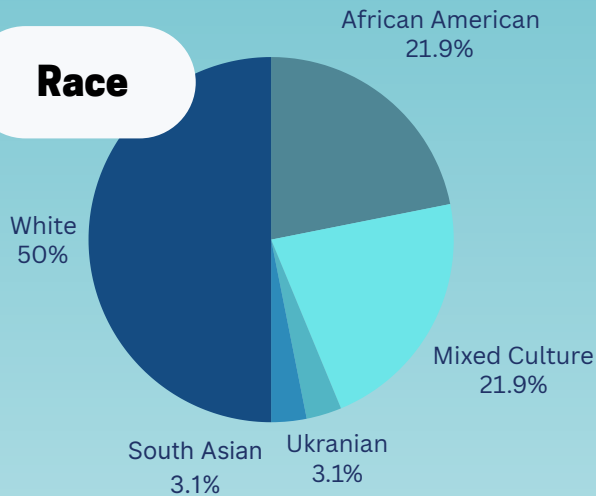
More than 40 individuals with lived experience shared a wide variety of insights. These individuals have overcome social and professional barriers by transitioning into professional roles and have become leaders in their respective fields. This crowdsourcing allowed people to report on their professional role, demographic data that might impact their journey to a professional role (e.g., barriers unique to a given subpopulation), and advice for other individuals with lived experience in their journey toward entering professional careers.

## Survey respondents

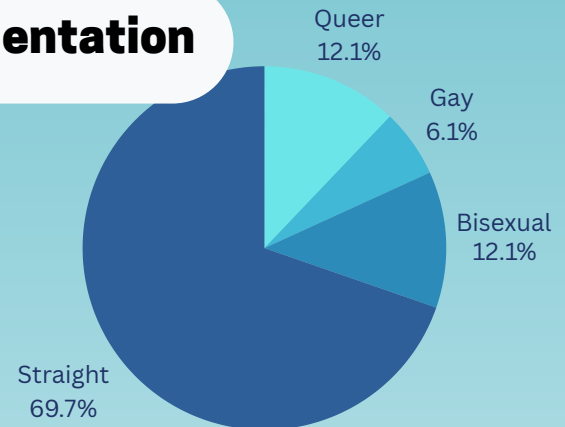
Individuals who responded to the survey represented a variety of ages, sexual orientations, gender identities, races, and types of professional roles attained.

Individuals with lived experience shared a wide variety of insights. Many individuals with lived experience encounter feelings of being lost along their professional journey as many social barriers and stigmatized beliefs still permeate professional spaces, effectively blocking them out. Our goal is that the results of this survey serve as a source of empowerment and guidance for individuals with lived experience as they pursue their professional passions and work to tear down barriers in their path toward professional success.

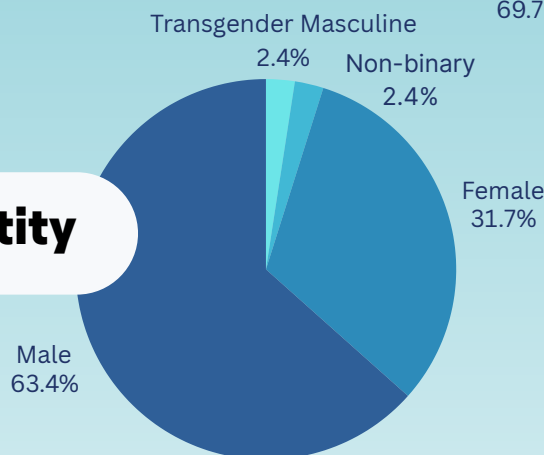
### Race



### Sexual Orientation



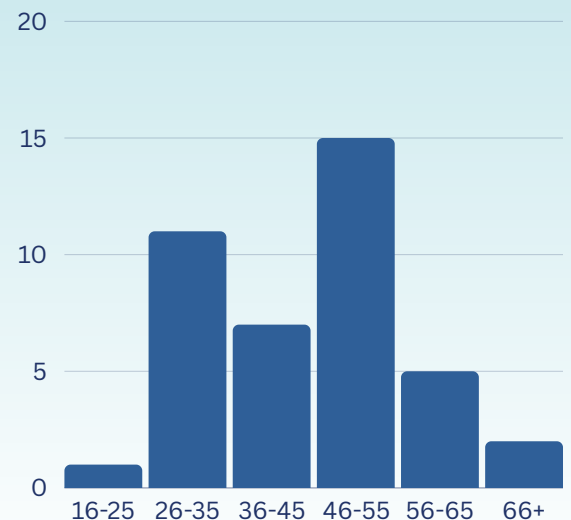
### Gender Identity



### Professional Role

accounting  
nonprofit  
higher education  
speaker  
counseling  
sales  
legal research/medical

### Age



# KEY COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING INTO A PROFESSIONAL ROLE

When reviewing the survey responses to the question, "If you were giving advice to someone with lived experience who wanted to transition into a professional role, what is the most significant piece of advice that you would want to pass on?" there were six converging themes that consistently appeared across most responses. These themes address six key points in successfully transitioning into a professional role.

## THEME #1

### BE AUTHENTIC

Many responses highlighted the importance of understanding and remaining true to oneself as you pursue your professional goals. One individual contributed:

*"Talk to others about your experience in a way that is transparent and authentic. This may require you to be vulnerable, which I know is uncomfortable, but oftentimes people connect with stories, and that may move others to engage with you toward action. This is especially important during the early stages of the transition process."*

## THEME #2

### BE PATIENT BUT PERSISTENT & FOCUS ON GOALS

Successfully working towards obtaining a professional role can be a long, arduous process where burnout is common. This individual offered insight on how to navigate the process:

*"While having goals are important, understanding that what you want to accomplish is not one big event but a series of well-planned smaller ones is even more relevant. Having a set of steps to take makes things less overwhelming [and] more manageable."*

## THEME #3

### ACTIVELY PRACTICE SELF-CARE

It is easy to forget about taking care of ourselves in today's fast-paced environment. This individual's advice brings to the fore the importance of remembering to find joy in living:

*"Know thyself well. Figure out what is right and wrong for you. Know that every breath is precious and every day is an adventure."*

## THEME #4

### DO NOT LIMIT YOUR POTENTIAL

Many early career professionals with lived experience report difficulty reconciling their past with what they are trying to achieve. This individual offers an empowering piece of advice:

*"Your lived experience has value that contributes to your professional self and the larger field. Draw strength, wisdom, and insight from this knowledge. It is not a hindrance but an asset."*

# KEY COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONING INTO A PROFESSIONAL ROLE (CONTINUED)

## THEME #5

### NETWORK & CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

No one succeeds alone, but some individuals with lived experience find connecting with others along their professional journey challenging. One individual offers this guidance:

*"[Connect with] other formerly incarcerated students and professionals! They have been a wealth of information, from how to apply to grad school to how to navigate colonized spaces with my soul intact!"*

## THEME #6

### DEVELOP YOUR PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

In transitioning into a professional role, many people experience moments of self-doubt that can prevent them from even applying for positions they are qualified to hold. This individual offered a bit of encouragement for those moments of doubt.

*"One of the biggest things I found when looking for jobs is that the job description may seem daunting, but if the qualifications are there, you might as well apply and do the interview and see how it goes. I never thought in a million years I'd work in a position like what I'm in now (in medical technology)."*

We hope this information serves as a tool for the success of all its readers. Every individual that contributed to its creation believes that the goal of obtaining a professional career should be possible for every individual, regardless of their background. We encourage readers to share these tips and words of encouragement with their networks and with anyone who may find value in their guidance. We can work together to eliminate barriers to success for every person working to better themselves and advance their career. We would also welcome your input.

Please get in touch with us at the link below if you would like to share your experience transitioning into a professional role and pass on some advice that would benefit others. We would love to join with you in our work.

<https://www.jeapinitiative.org/contact-us/>

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