

Decisions Without Direction



Career Guidance and Decision-Making Among American Youth

A study conducted for Ferris State University's
Career Institute for Education and Workforce Development,
in partnership with the National Association of Manufacturers,
the Precision Metalforming Association Educational Foundation and
the Associated Equipment Distributors Foundation

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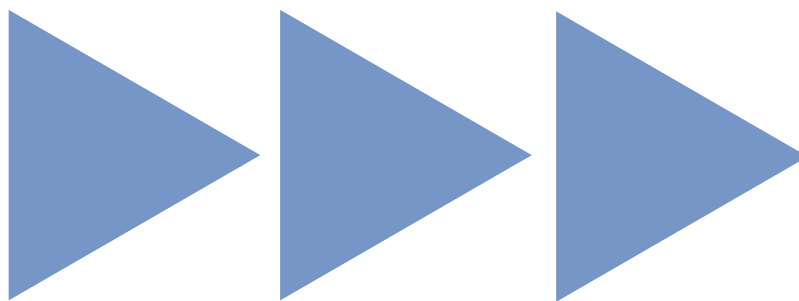
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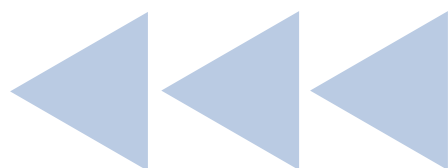
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Decisions Without Direction:
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Among American Youth

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from EPIC-MRA, Lansing, MI

Executive Summary

Overview: Toward Better Career Prep

Without question, young people face many of life's most important decisions in those transition years between high school and the working world. Unfortunately, too many students are unaware of their education and employment options. The path they follow to their careers is indirect, and their decisions are often based on scant information.

The nation's career guidance system is falling short. Business interests call for more properly trained workers, at the same time questioning the value of a traditional four-year college education in providing that training. Research shows a stark disconnect between the courses of study students pursue and existing career openings and business needs. Educators have seen relatively low interest in technology programs despite continuing demand for technologically adept graduates and high income potential for those who choose high-tech careers.

Finally, research shows only a fraction of students who pursue higher education nationwide graduate. Career goals play a critical role in student success by helping students focus their interests. To determine what factors influence young people's choice of careers and career paths, the Ferris State University Career Institute for Education and Workforce Development has teamed with the National Association of Manufacturers, the Precision Metalforming Association Educational Foundation and the Associated Equipment Distributors Foundation to complete a study of the attitudes and career plans of the nation's high-school juniors and seniors.

The results of this study yield a number of interesting conclusions and suggest new ways of approaching career education in the K-12 system and beyond—methods to improve the ability of students to choose careers and career paths and to provide business and industry with skilled and satisfied employees.

This report on the attitudes, career plans and factors that influence the career decision-making process among American youth provides a range of interesting and useful data. A more detailed review of the study's findings follows this executive summary. Presented below are three broad conclusions drawn from study's findings, along with supporting data from the national survey of high-school juniors and seniors. It is our hope that this report will add to the growing body of research aimed at enabling our youth to make more informed career decisions.

Key Conclusions

On Their Own

Students perceive a lack of career guidance in their schools, and often cannot name anyone outside of their parents who have been helpful in career counseling. Furthermore, most admit that parental guidance has been limited to a few hours in the past few months.

The Narrow Path

The bias toward pursuing a degree from a four-year college is pervasive. More than two-thirds of American young people plan to pursue a four-year college education, despite the fact that far fewer will succeed in this endeavor and that fields requiring only technical training are in need of employees.

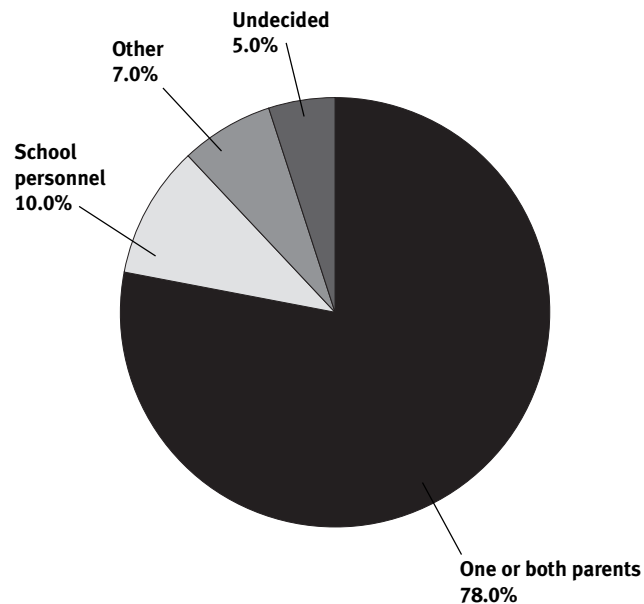
Just a Feeling

Students' career choices are most often based on personal interest over career opportunity. Very few students pick career fields based on job availability or salary—instead, they pursue what they enjoy.

Conclusion 1: Students Perceive Lack of Career Guidance

The most striking finding of the study? Most young people are receiving little to no career guidance outside the home, and not enough from their parents. Just 10 percent said school personnel had played the primary role in their career guidance—the vast majority (78 percent) credited their parents as the top adult influence.

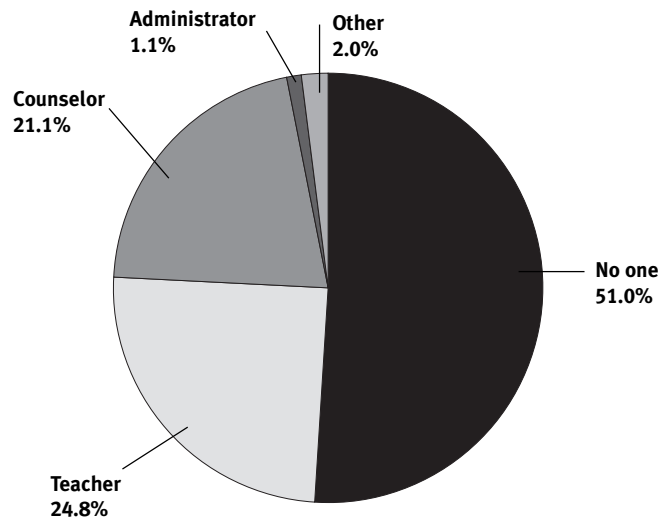
Who is primarily responsible for helping plan for a career or job? (n=809)



Source: Ferris State University

who don't perceive any real career guidance occurring in high school—more than half fall into this category.

Who in high school has been helpful in advising on career options or options to further your education? (n=809)



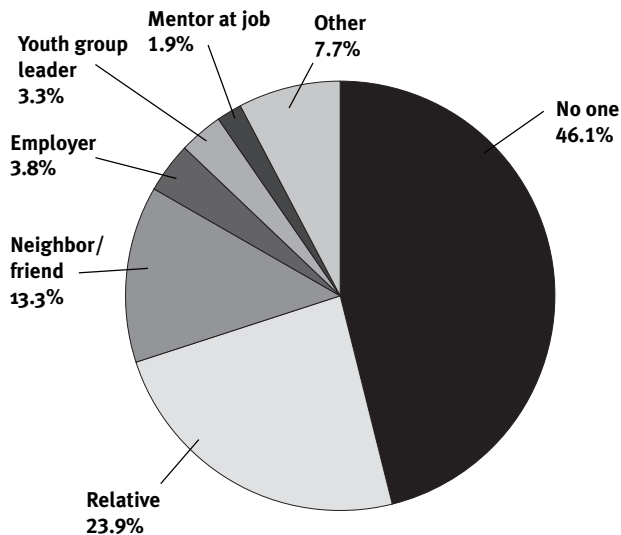
Source: Ferris State University

Among school employees, teachers edge out counselors as the most likely adult career influence. It also should be noted that 20 percent of the students surveyed could think of nothing their high school was doing to help with career decision-making.

Similar to the results illustrated in the chart above, a high percentage of students (46 percent) could identify no one outside of their parents or schools who had played a significant role in career counseling.

That parents are the primary adult influence on career decisions may not be so surprising. More alarming, perhaps, is the number of students

Who not associated with your school has been helpful in advising you on career options or options to further your education? (n=809)



Source: Ferris State University

To make matters worse, even though most young people view their parents as their biggest adult influence when it comes to careers, *more than two-thirds (70 percent) claimed to have spent three hours or less in the past few months discussing careers with their parents.*

That’s not much guidance on which to base a life decision—and most parents have a fairly narrow frame of reference when it comes to jobs and job training. This lack of career guidance leads to high-school graduates who are either undecided as to what career to pursue, or who may make a poorly informed decision that they may regret or abandon altogether. As a result,

- success in the workplace or in post-secondary education is less likely
- workers’ skills and aspirations are not aligned with employers’ needs
- both of these factors lead to a diminishing pool of qualified workers.

Even so, 72 percent of those surveyed say they’ve picked a career to pursue. This trend cuts across all groups, but in a few cases there are notable differences. For example, Hispanic young people are much less likely than others to have made a career decision—less than three out of five (57 percent) say they have. Similarly, young people in the West are less likely than others to have made a decision, a finding that also may be related to ethnicity since Hispanics are more heavily represented in the West (and South, where the effect is also noticeable).

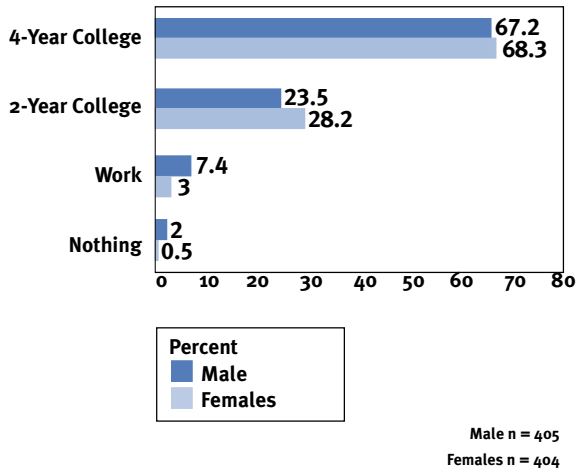
Two additional conclusions from the study further complicate the career-guidance picture. Recommendations for addressing these issues follow a more complete discussion of these additional findings.

**Conclusion 2:
Four-Year College Bias is Pervasive**

Ask young people what they plan to do after graduation, and nearly all of them will tell you some sort of post-secondary education figures into their thinking. More than two-thirds (68 percent) say they are headed to a four-year college or university, with 26 percent planning to attend a community college or technical trade school.

Only a handful—6 percent—plan no further schooling. And although men are more likely than women to choose to go straight to work after high school, the percentages of university-bound men and women are nearly identical.

**Which of the following comes closest to describing what you expect to do after graduation from high school?
By gender (n=809)**



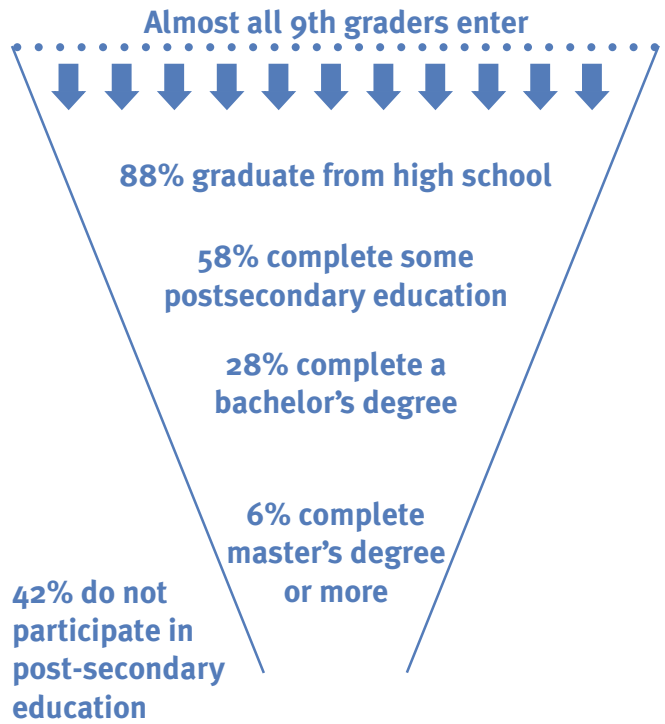
Source: Ferris State University

As with gender, so with race/ethnicity. The general trend is toward post-secondary education for the great majority, and this holds for all racial and ethnic groups. Still, some differences can be observed. Hispanics, for example, are much less likely to favor a four-year post-secondary school than whites or blacks, and much more likely to favor a two-year school. The data also suggest, though not conclusively, that there are some marginal differences in post-high-school plans in different regions of the country. The college of choice is more likely to be a four-year school in the Northeast than elsewhere and more likely to be a two-year school in the West than elsewhere. This finding again may be related to ethnicity, since Hispanics are more heavily represented in the West.

This high percentage of young people planning to go to college might sound appealing, but the reality of the situation is less so. In truth, signifi-

cantly fewer high-school graduates enter college, and only a fraction of those emerge with that coveted bachelor's degree.

Too Much Leakage in the Career Training Sieve



Completion rates of 25-29 year-olds
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The bias toward four-year degrees is so pervasive, however, that many students never explore other options.

- 68 percent of those surveyed said that the best jobs require *at least* a four-year college education.
- 41 percent attribute a sense of embarrassment to voc-ed training programs.
- 45 percent said pursuing technical training might limit their career options.

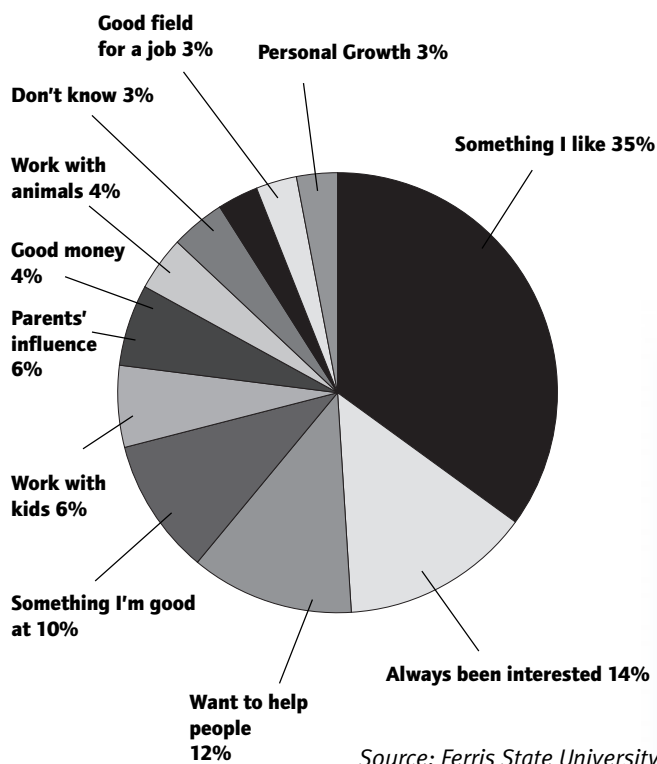
Improved career counseling for K-12 students would help the situation, but the fact remains that many colleges and universities are poorly

equipped to assist students who are undecided on a career. The bureaucracy and lack of coordination throughout the post-secondary education system creates barriers that restrict students' options and impede their educational progress. The impact of these obstacles can be felt in business and industry—especially in career fields requiring less than a four-year degree.

Conclusion 3: Career Choice Based on Interest Over Opportunity

Think young people are only in it for the money? Think again. Asked what were the primary reasons for their career choices, just 3.7 percent indicated “good pay.” In fact, the vast majority offered emotionally based, personal reasons, rather than pragmatic considerations.

What is the main reason why you chose your preferred career or job? (n=673)



Notice that only 2.5 percent cited job availability (“Good field for a job”) as the main reason they chose a particular career. The disconnect between the availability of jobs and the careers that young people choose is illustrated most clearly in computer-intensive fields—47.6 percent of students identified computers as one of the areas presenting the greatest career opportunities for young people, but only 6.8 percent plan to pursue a career in this field. The same holds true for many other career fields.

Perceived opportunity versus interest for top 11 career selections

Career Selection	Percent selecting as their own career field	Percent perceiving field as a great career opportunity
Computers	6.8%	47.6%
Business	4.7%	16.8%
Engineering	3.2%	8.7%
Education, teaching	9.4%	24.3%
Health care and medical	21.0%	51.1%
Military service	3.2%	7.3%
Law	6.8%	14.7%
Science	4.0%	6.9%
Automotive	2.7%	3.4%
Veterinary medicine	3.2%	0.6%
Art	2.7%	0.5%

Source: Ferris State University

Note that in veterinary medicine and art the opposite holds true—students feel little opportunity exists in these areas, but a few choose to pursue them anyway.


Interestingly, job availability and pay are the two issues most commonly addressed when employers try to recruit workers to a particular field, but few students emphasize either of these factors above personal interest. And while 92 percent of students rate salary as at least somewhat important in choosing a career, 94 percent rank free time for family and recreation as at least somewhat important (with 60 percent ranking free time as “very important”).

Careers have not traditionally been marketed this way—it is easier to advertise annual salary and number of job openings than to portray the less tangible aspects of a career, like lifestyle or quality of person-to-person interaction. Not doing so, however, exacerbates the problem of worker shortages in high-demand fields that lack immediate appeal to young people.



Decisions With Direction: Recommendations for a Quality Career Guidance System

The key findings from this study reveal several significant weaknesses in the nation’s career development system. The aforementioned data, and the more comprehensive look at the study’s findings that follows in this report, also provide educators, policymakers, career and workforce development professionals, parents and employers with information that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our nation’s career guidance system.



It is our hope that this study will further the awareness of the important issue of career guidance, and that this enhanced awareness will be followed by action. Below are recommendations that all stakeholders who have a vested interest in creating a higher quality career and workforce development system—and those who wish to see more young adults realize their career dreams—can embrace.

Fund and empower K-12 career counselors

Effective career guidance is integral to the secondary education experience. The K-12 system needs educational counselors with career counseling as their primary focus. These counselors should have the resources and professional background needed to assist students in making informed career and educational decisions.

Better utilize of the summer months

The career guidance that occurs with our nation’s young adults, parents, teachers and counselors should not be limited to the academic school year. Much can be done to make greater use of our career-tech centers, community colleges university campuses and local business and industry to provide career exposure. Job shadowing, company or plant tours, internships, and the creation of summer “career camps” are just a few of the underutilized means that can be used to improve career guidance and career decision-making.

Increase partnerships between educators and industry

Educators should play a vital role in the process by which young adults make career decisions. K-12 schools, universities and employers can do much more to increase teachers’ exposure to different careers so that they help to advise students. The use of industry mentors, scholarships for targeted academic programs or career fields, adopt-a-school programs and more creative internship and work experiences serve as a few examples of how these partnerships can be enhanced.

Realigned career recruitment/image campaigns

Salary and job availability are common themes in recruitment campaigns for particular careers. Although these are important, groups seeking to boost high-school students’ interest in

specific careers must create marketing or image campaigns that appeal to the sensibilities of young adults. Is a given career interesting? Enjoyable? Does the career allow a person to interact with people, the community, or society directly or indirectly? Are work hours flexible? When creating career recruitment campaigns, these are the questions that should be answered.

Improved credit transfer among educational institutions

The call for improved credit transfer among educational institutions is a popular one. The findings from this study only serve to fuel the argument for greater articulation between education providers in order to provide increased credit transferability for students. All stakeholders should work to break the barriers that lengthen the time it takes for young adults or individuals “re-careering” to become educated and trained in preparation for any given career. Education leaders and policy makers can take the lead by facilitating and encouraging greater use of streamlined credit transfer among all types of education providers.

Integration of career development systems nationwide

The value of creating a unified, comprehensive, and integrated career development system nationwide cannot be underestimated. A well-educated, well-trained and *balanced* workforce is central to the standing of the U.S. economy in the future global marketplace. The integration of career development systems can serve to streamline efforts, create awareness of career alternatives, and provide young adults with the information needed to make choices and plan for the rest of their lives.

Promotion of the career pathways concept

The implementation of “career pathway” guidance programs can do much to create career awareness among young adults. Education providers can give their students much greater exposure to careers options by creating the structure and offering activities that provide meaningful connections between education and the world of work. The use and innovative application of the career pathways concept will better enable educators and counselors to provide young adults with the information needed to make more informed career decisions.

