

Parents Have Their Say...About Their College-Age Children's Career Decisions

By Jeffrey Taylor,
Marcia B. Harris,
and Susan Taylor
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Although this study provides insight about how parents perceive their role in career development, bear in mind that there was no random sampling of participants and all responses were voluntary. Parents may have attempted to provide answers that they believed were desirable to the career office staff—those who distributed the survey. In addition, only parents of incoming college freshman were questioned. It is feasible that at different class years, parents would answer differently as they and the students become more career savvy. The sample may only be representative of incoming freshmen of a large public university. Smaller institutions, or even other institutions with the same enrollment, may attract a different type of student and family; therefore, the results may not be applicable to other institutions.

Families, parents and guardians in particular, play a significant role in the occupational aspirations and career goal development of their children. Without parental approval or support, students and young adults are often reluctant to pursue—or even explore—diverse career possibilities. Although parents acknowledge their role and attempt to support the career development of their children, parental messages contain an underlying message of “don’t make the same mistakes that I did.” These interactions may influence adolescents and young adults to select specific collegiate majors or pursue particular occupations. Numerous studies (Knowles, 1998; Marjoribanks, 1997; Mau and Bikos, 2000; Smith, 1991; Wilson and Wilson, 1992) have found that college students and young adults cite parents as an important influence on their choice of career. Yet parents may be unaware of the influence they have on the career development and vocational choice of their children. University career services of

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) decided to survey parents of incoming freshmen in order to learn more about parents’ beliefs regarding their college-age children’s career choice and the influences on that choice.

Background

Studies find that the family appears to play a critical role in a child’s career development (Guerra and Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Lankard, 1995; Mickelson and Valasco, 1998; Otto, 2000; Mau, Hitchcock and Calvert, 1998). Researchers have attempted to understand the variables that influence students’ occupational goals (e.g. family, level of parental education, school, peers, personality, and socioeconomic status).

There have been varying opinions and findings, however, as to which specific family characteristics influence career aspirations. For instance, conflicting data exist regarding the influence of socioeconomic variables. Some research (Crockett and Bingham, 2000; Mau and Bikos, 2000; Teachman and Paasch, 1998) suggests that both parent education and income influence career aspirations, whereas other research (Hossler and Stage, 1992; Sarigiani, Wilson, Peterson, and Vicary, 1990; Wilson and Wilson, 1992) indicates only parent education is an influence. Other family variables that have been shown to influence career aspirations include the parents’ occupation (Trice, 1991) and family size (Downey, 1995; Marjoribanks, 1986; Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Croutter, 1984; Singh, et al., 1995). The father’s occupational status is highly correlated with his son’s occupation (Blau, 1992; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Conroy, 1997). Family size also appears to influence adolescent career aspirations because parents with

large families tend to have less money to aid the older children in attending college, while younger children may receive more financial assistance since the financial strain is less once the older children leave home (Schulenberg, et al., 1984).

Yet, in other studies (Boatwright, Ching, and Parr, 1992; Mau and Bikos, 2000), each of these family variables has also been found to be insignificant in influencing aspirations. Nevertheless, families appear to influence, at least to some extent, career aspirations of adolescents and young adults. If these family factors are influential in career decision making, then it becomes difficult to explain how an impoverished student from a broken home can go on to become a wealthy, financially successful worker. As the paradigm of research shifts, it becomes clear that family interactions are just as important as physical descriptors, as discussed in the next section.

Parental Expectations

Over the years, research has moved from examining family demographics and their relationships to career development to examining the dynamics of family interactions. One consistent finding in research suggests that adolescents' own aspirations are influenced by their parents' aspirations or expectations for them. When adolescents perceive their parents to have high educational expectations for them, adolescents are likely to have higher aspirations for themselves. A 1998 Sylvan Learning Center report indicates that parents' and childrens' views about career aspirations are more compatible than incompatible. Parents are influential figures with whom, whether intentionally or unintentionally, children become aware of and get exposed to occupations or career opportunities and implied expectations.

Other studies have separately examined the influences of each parent on the career choices of their sons or daughters and have found that mothers tend to have more influence on the career decisions/aspirations of their children than fathers. For instance, Mickelson and Velasco (1998) cited their interviews conducted with 70 young adults in 1986. They found that mothers were the most influential and that daughters' occupational aspirations were often similar to their mothers'

chosen professions (Mickelson and Velasco, 1998). In similar studies, students were asked items such as, "What do you want to do with your life?" and to indicate if they agree or disagree with statements such as "My mother (father) encouraged me to make my own decisions." The students' responses were similar to those of their parents. These studies also found that students wanted to discuss career planning primarily with their mothers.

Overall, research supports the influence of parental expectations and aspirations on the career decisions and aspirations of their children. These expectations lay a foundation for parents' behaviors and interactions with their children, which then indirectly or directly influence choices they make in the future.

Parent-Child Interactions

Since the mid-fifties, research has suggested that family interaction is linked to occupational behavior. It is even believed that possibly the notion of family interaction or functioning—incorporating parenting style (authoritarian or passive), level of support, guidance, and responsiveness—may have more influence on career development than demographics, including educational aspirations of parents.

Parental support and encouragement are factors that have been found to influence vocational outcome. For instance, the attitudes and behaviors that children adopt toward work may be the result of what parents say. Parents convey their influence to children through interactions such as conversations and through their reactions (both verbal and nonverbal). This then affects what children think, say, and perceive about various careers.

Often there is a contradiction between what parents say to young adults and what they ask of them. For instance, a parent may comment that it is acceptable to pursue a position with a nonprofit agency, but then counter such statements with comments about low pay and long hours. These types of references imply that it's more important to earn a high salary than to pursue a satisfying position. Parents may also become overly involved in career decisions because they want their child to be more content in a career than they are in their own jobs. Children may begin to identify and

accept what parents say in order to please them. Therefore, they take their parents' comments as absolute and neglect to challenge them or to assess their validity. Although parenting styles may differ, parents tend to want to do what is best for their children, and children generally pay attention to what is said by their parents. Thus, children are affected.

Summary of Previous Research

While research has shown that there are numerous family variables that influence the career choices of young adults (i.e. socioeconomic status, education level of parents, parenting styles, interactions), it appears that family interactions play an important role in forming aspirations and decisions about careers. Interestingly, there has been a great deal of research focusing on family interactions and family characteristics on career development, yet there have been few studies that examine parental perceptions of their influence.

The UNC Study

UNC-Chapel Hill's career office, through this study, aimed to examine the following questions:

1. Who do parents perceive as having the greatest influence on their children's career development (mother, father, counselor, etc.)?
2. Is there a difference between the levels of influence that parents think they should have versus what they perceive they do have over their children?
3. Which factors do parents believe their child's career choice should be based upon?

In August 2001, the parents of incoming freshmen (Class of 2005) were asked to complete a brief four-question survey during summer orientation. A total of 1,115 people attended the orientation seminars and 493 surveys were returned, yielding a 44 percent response rate.

The survey asked the following questions:

- "How much influence do you think you as a parent should have on your student's career choice?"
- "How much influence do you think you as a parent do have on your student's career choice?"
- "Do you think your student's career choice should

be based upon:

- The job market,
- Interests and abilities,
- A combination of the two.
- "Which three individuals do you think have had the greatest influence thus far on your student's career direction?"

A five-point rating scale was used, with "1=very little" and "5=very great" for the first two questions. For the final question, parents selected from choices such as mother, father, counselor, friend, etc. Parents could also select "other" and provide a description or name of the person(s).

Results

Close to half of the parents (46.4 percent) chose a neutral rating of "3" on a 5-point scale for the first two questions (How much influence should you have, and how much influence do you have, on your child's career development?). An almost equal number of parents (45.4 percent) stated that they should have little to very little influence on career decisions. Only 8.1 percent suggested that they should have a great influence on career decision-making.

When asked to rate their "actual" influence on career decisions, 38.5 percent said that they have little to very little influence and only 15.8 percent rated themselves as having a very high influence on career decisions. Again, 45.4 percent gave a neutral response. (Please note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.)

When asked what they believed should be the basis for career choice, parents overwhelmingly (72.2 percent) responded that career choice should be based upon a combination of interests/abilities and the job market. Of the remaining respondents, 27.6 percent said that career choice should be based solely upon interests/abilities, and 0.2 percent stated that career choice should be based upon the labor market.

The final question asked parents to rank the top three influential people in their children's career development. Mother or father was most often ranked first or second. However, in this study, a teacher was ranked first almost as often as a parent. A counselor was almost never ranked in the first slot—overall, counselors came

in a distant fourth. It's important to note that this study was conducted with parents of incoming freshmen—students who had not yet come in contact with a college counselor.

Discussion

Research demonstrates that parents' comments, beliefs, and interactions with their children may have a profound influence on their child's vocational development. Many of these past studies focused on demographics or interactions from the young adult perspective; previous researchers did not ask parents themselves about their perceptions of their role in this developmental process. The findings in this study appear to replicate some findings of previous studies. However, when examining parental perceptions, an interesting trend was found. In rating their perceptions of their influence, 38.5 percent of parents responded that they do not have much influence on career decisions. An even greater percentage of parents, 45.4 percent, believe they should have little to very little influence on career decisions. And only 8.1 percent state that they should have a significant influence on their child's career decisions.

The results appear to demonstrate that the majority of parents may be viewing career development as a something that is out of their control. Parents seem to realize that while they may have more influence than anyone else, it is nevertheless rather minimal.

Consistent with previous findings, parents perceive themselves as the most influential figures in their children's career development and decisions. Parents overwhelmingly ranked themselves as the most influential people. The only other groups mentioned fairly consistently were teachers, followed by counselors. Therefore, it appears as if parents recognize their role in the career decision-making process. They may also have felt obligated to list themselves high and rank others lower because it may be disheartening to a parent to think that they are not influential in their children's development. Although they perceive themselves to have minimal influence on adolescent career decision-making, they, nevertheless, view themselves as being more influential than any other individual. They may be interpreting career choice as simply a process

of trial and error that their children need to experience for themselves.

When students become curious about pursuing a particular field of study or career plan, parents who feel that they should not interfere may appear aloof to their children, causing miscommunication between the two parties. This passivity may result from a lack of knowledge about careers, a desire to instill independence in their children, or a fear of becoming dictatorial (particularly if a child is not content with the parents' choice). Regardless of their motives, parents need to be aware of their role in career development, since previous research indicates that they have the most influential role. If parents do not feel comfortable discussing various careers with their children, it may be easier to do nothing or say that they don't have any influence.

Most parents in this study (72.2 percent) feel career choice should be based on a combination of the job market and the student's interests/abilities. Although it may be important to pursue a job in a field with a moderate to high demand, parents recognize it's also important to discover and uncover all careers that may be of interest to their children. Although parents perceived career choice to be based upon the job market and likes/abilities, they should be conscious of how this message gets communicated. For instance, if a child wishes to pursue a particular vocation that is not in high demand, how are parents going to react? This reaction and the comments they make will be of significant influence. Parents may not be aware that many careers encompass similar personality types. For example, certain positions in human resources may not be all that different from career counseling or vocational rehabilitation positions.

Although it makes sense to pursue a career that coincides with one's own interests and abilities, the job market plays a huge role in the ultimate hiring process. By selecting the third choice (market and likes/abilities), parents may be indicating that both elements are equally important. College is where students develop their identities (Evans, Forney, and Guido-BiDrito, 1998), and exploration during this time is critical. The researchers are not suggesting that students disregard the job market as a basis for career choice; however, it changes over time just as students'

likes/abilities change. As a result, parents, through their actions and statements, should encourage children to consider all factors.

The results from this survey clearly demonstrate that parents recognize themselves as having influence on the career decisions of their children. However, when asked to rate their perceived and actual influence, many parents believe that they should have and do have very little influence. Results of the present study on perceived parental influence on career development of adolescents suggests that parents may feel nobody except the "self" can impact career development.

Conclusion

This study on parental perceptions of career influence on their children provides some enlightening results. In previous research, it was found that students seek career advice and approval most often from their

parents. This research confirms those findings from the parental point of view. However, it was also found that although parents see themselves as being more influential than anyone else, at the same time they believe that they do not have and should not have much influence on their childrens' career decisions.

Since most young adults begin exploring careers in college, the link between students, parents, and career centers may be a more valuable link than once thought. Rather than just serving students, career centers may be well-served by implementing programs and methods to also educate parents about career development. Students may be young adults, yet previous research shows that in the end, most still seek parental approval. This study on parental perceptions illustrates the need for more research on parental perceptions and for programs that make parents aware of career information as well as their actual influence.