Navigating Multiple Pathways: A Guide to Supporting Adolescent Career Decision-Making and Choice

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Acknowledgments

About BigFuture

BigFuture is a free, online resource that helps students take the right first step after high school. We help you plan for college, pay for college, and explore careers. Whether you're interested in a four-year university, community college, or career training, BigFuture has what you need to start planning your future, your way. Bigfuture.org

About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve.

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Foreword

Authors: Allison Danielsen, executive director of BigFuture Careers and Partnerships at College Board, and Joel Vargas, vice president of the Education Practice at Jobs for the Future.

For many young people, adolescence is marked by a shared question: What's next? It's a question that should inspire excitement about vast possibilities. Yet too often, students don't have the information, experiences, or advice they need to be aware of or effectively evaluate all those possibilities and decide what's their right first step after high school.

This country's complex and ever-changing education and workforce landscape presents both new opportunities and confounding challenges for young people contemplating their futures. And the challenges often overshadow the sense of opportunity because this evolving landscape is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to navigate. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and other technologies are transforming entire career fields, employers are rethinking the qualifications they seek in job applicants—in some cases eliminating degree requirements—and questions around college affordability are creating greater uncertainty about the return on investment.

Those are just a few of the factors that young learners have to consider as they try to answer that critical question: What's next? What's the "right" path after high school for me? Enter the workforce? Go to college? Enroll in a training program to build in-demand job skills? Enlist in the military? Take a gap year? Learn online or in-person? Some combination of these?

Those questions are leading members of Generation Z to reevaluate their post-high school options. Many are thinking of bypassing the four-year college path and instead enrolling in community college or building job skills in short-term training programs, apprenticeships, or other forms of work-based learning. But there's not enough support to help students navigate the paths that don't include a four-year degree. Early results of surveys of more than 1,000 U.S. high school students conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of College Board show that non-college-bound students are less likely than college-bound students to say they are hopeful, motivated, excited, and confident about exploring their futures. This means our systems are failing to serve all students equally by not providing more guidance about a greater variety of pathways to good jobs and careers.

Meeting a Need for Information, Resources, and Advice

Jobs for the Future (JFF) and BigFuture want all students to have the sense of agency and purpose that comes with feeling hopeful, motivated, excited, confident. An essential step in achieving this is to ensure that high school students and their families receive a timely and abundant flow of information, resources, and advising in order to thoroughly weigh their options and make well-informed decisions that lead to successful first career moves based on their skills, interests, and goals.

Our organizations are part of the growing field of educators, policymakers, advocates, employers, and others working to expand the supports and resources available to everyone involved in making these important decisions.

The guide takes a deep dive into the career planning process, from early and ongoing opportunities to learn about potential careers, to self-discovery experiences that build awareness of an individual's interests and values and provide exposure to the array of postsecondary choices—all aimed at helping students set goals, weigh options, and plan for long-term success.

We focus on four key truths that, in our view, bring clarity to the process of choosing an initial career entry point as a young person asking: What's next?

1. **Career planning isn't a linear process, and it takes time.** When it comes to career decisions, it's not just the "moment of choice" that matters; the foundational experiences that lead up to it are critical. Career development begins at a very young age when kids first start thinking about what they want to be when they grow up. Students may not begin to seriously consider their own career possibilities until later in high school, but their thoughts about the possibilities start to take shape earlier.

2. **Career decisions are *personal*, not just analytical.** Students' personal circumstances greatly influence their decision-making processes. Access to the information and real-world experiences that are crucial for choosing a strong career fit can be limited by factors like household income and social networks. Moreover, wading through the options and information can be especially challenging for adolescents because they're at a stage of development where their attitudes and cognitive abilities are changing rapidly. If adults have a better understanding of these factors, they will be better able to support the career decisions of young people in their lives.

3. **High school students want more ways to explore careers and the full range of available postsecondary learning pathways.** Only 20% of students in the Morning Consult survey say that they have heard much information about noncollege pathways. And students

who haven't started exploring their post-high school options said that they would be more motivated to start planning if they had access to information about the financial prospects the various pathways offer, guidance from adults, and opportunities to engage in work-based learning and take career and technical education (CTE) courses in high school.

4. **The number and diversity of learning pathways are expanding rapidly, creating both opportunity and risk.** In the United States, nearly 1 million postsecondary education and training programs exist, each issuing their own credentials. And that number is expected to grow rapidly. The options include not only traditional two- and four-year degrees but also digital badges, certificates, licenses, apprenticeships, and industry-recognized certifications. With that many choices, there's an urgent need for quality and consistent information about these programs so young people can identify the credentials with the most labor market value. Without a career decision and planning foundation in place, young people faced with this overload of choices run the risk of making underinformed decisions about their career and education pathways.

Families, teachers, guidance counselors, and other caring adults play an important role. Together, they provide young people with information and support in the months (and years) leading up to the "moment of choice" to postsecondary work and learning. Our guide provides a wealth of information and outlines actions to help young people navigate this complex ecosystem and find their most fulfilling paths—whatever they may be.

About This Guide

This guide is intended to help educators, program directors, career counselors, employers, families, and other caring adults in their efforts to create career learning and navigation ecosystems that support and guide student **career decision-making and choices,** taking into account personal, social, and life aspirations and career goals.

Drawing from an extensive review of relevant research literature as well as a broad scan of high-quality resources, this guide asks two key questions that are essential to understanding how to support young people to have self-efficacy in their career decision-making abilities:

1. How do young people develop their own career identity and pathways?

2. What influences the decisions young people make about their career paths?

While the answers to these questions along with the other information and resources shared in the following pages can be used in multiple ways by various actors, we specifically have the following groups in mind:

- **K-12 educators** who want to integrate research-based approaches into their roles and systems (e.g., administrators, classroom teachers, career and technical educators, guidance counselors, college and career advisors, instructional leaders).

- **Intermediaries** that similarly want to build capacity to enhance their role in the career pathways space (e.g., community-based organizations, afterschool/out-of-school time programs, workforce boards).

- **Employers** that want to understand the most impactful ways to support their future employees and customers in their career decisions and post high school lives.

- **Families and other caring adults** who want to better understand how to support young people in making key decisions about their futures.

These actors have both distinct and overlapping roles to play if all students are to have:

⇒ Increased information about and experience of the world of work through a host of activities and sources that can take place in and outside of school, online and in person, in the community as well as workplaces.

⇒ Structured reflection opportunities to understand their skills, interests, and aspirations and how these might link to future career possibilities as well as the pathways to them.

⇒ Support in setting goals, planning, assessing progress, and adapting as new information and perspectives arise.

⇒ Awareness of and access to both college and non-college pathway options with transparent ROI so students and families can make well-informed decisions.

Meet Sophan and David

Sophan and David[1] are friends who met while working together in an after-school job at a local supermarket. Both Sophan and David are finishing up their sophomore years in high school. Sophan is near the top of her class at the local urban high school. Her parents came to the United States as refugees, and they have always stressed education as the key to success. David lives in a neighboring suburb. He is a solid B student whose parents have clearly benefited from their college educations, but they also have stressed doing what makes you happy.

While Sophan knows college is in her future, she is worried about racking up a lot of debt. Her cousin is a pharmacist and seems to have managed college and is making a good living, but she isn't sure if that sort of job is for her. She wants to make the right postsecondary choice in terms of learning and future career options. David, on the other hand, isn't sure he wants to go to college even though most his friends, like Sophan, are planning on that. He knows he doesn't want to be an accountant like his father or work for a tech company like his mother. But if he doesn't go to college, what would he do?

What's Next? The Path After High School

Young people like Sophan and David and their families face a post high school landscape that is rapidly shifting. This is happening at a time when students and employers alike are expressing and acting upon increased interest in a more comprehensive look at career pathways beyond college. including workforce entry, job skill training, gap years, internships, apprenticeships, military service, and more. While non-college pathways have always been the reality for a large percentage of students, especially those from low-income families, this is a new era in which these non-college pathways are seeing renewed attention, support, and investment as viable options for students of all academic and socioeconomic levels.[2]

With this expansion of options, it is no wonder students like Sophan and David are unsure of which path will lead to success once they have their high school diploma in hand. It can feel daunting, but it also means tremendous opportunity if students are provided with the kinds of strategies and supports shared in this guide. As future workers, students need to understand what the possible pathways and training or steps are to move toward their goals, be that college or one of the many other pathways.

Readers will learn about career development and navigation and gain insights into how young people make decisions generally and about careers specifically. Along the way, examples of resources and possible supports are provided.
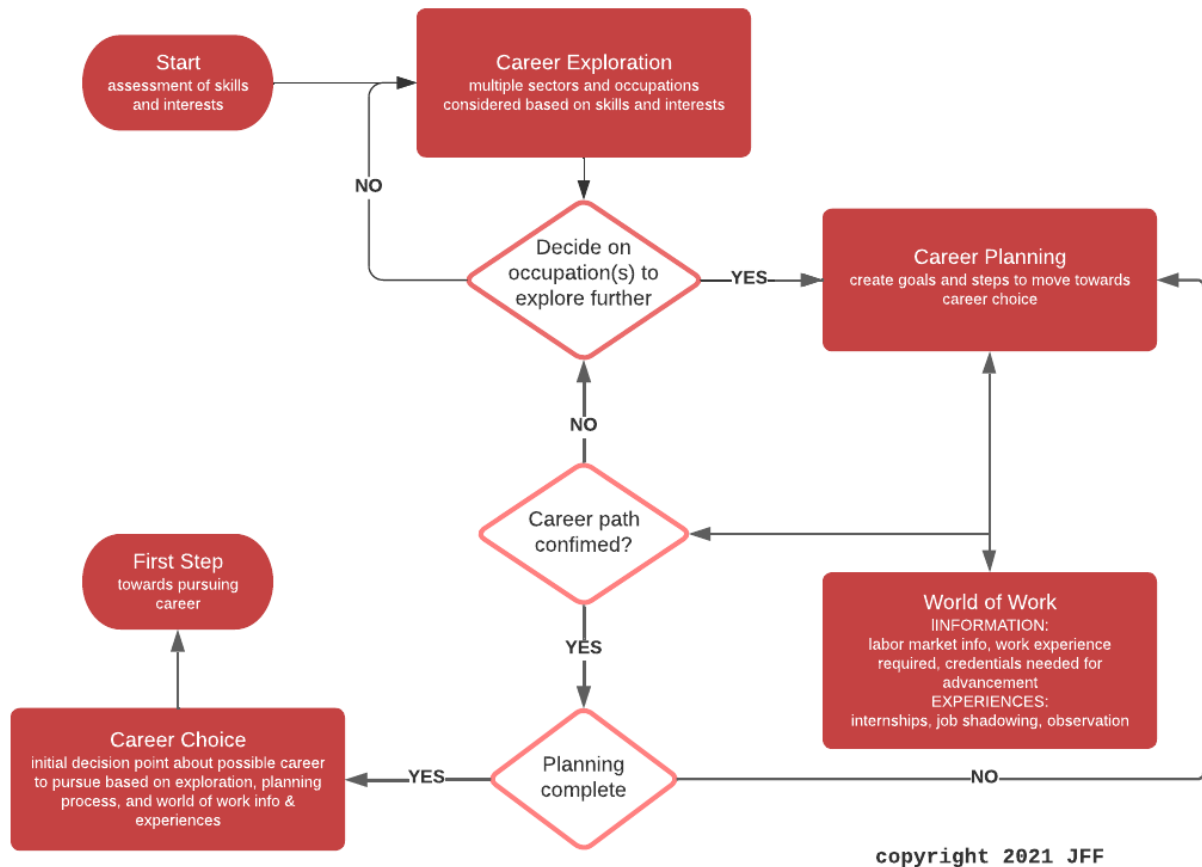
What Do We Know About Career Development and Navigation?

Career development actually starts in the early years. Children absorb insights about what jobs exist and what the world of work looks like from their parents, other adult role models,[3] and other sources such as media. For adolescents, career development involves many interwoven processes. These include career exploration, strengthening self-awareness around skills and aspirations, using information to inform goal setting and decision-making,[4] career planning, career choice awareness, and increased knowledge about the world of work.[5] Career development tasks support the emergence of a vocational or career identity. Career identity development has been associated with a stronger sense of career direction, overall career efficacy,[6] and increased confidence in one's career choices.[7] Career identity can also help students conceptualize how they will contribute to the larger community and overall society in which they live.[8]

For adolescents, career development involves four key activities: **1) career exploration, 2) career planning, 3) experience of the world of work, and 4) determining an initial career choice.** Keep in mind these activities may not occur in a straight line and often overlap with one another.[9] They are also likely to happen repeatedly throughout one's life as part of career navigation—it can be helpful for young people to know that as they engage in these activities, they are building a foundation in navigating and informed decision-making about their career paths that they can return to and build upon over their lifetime. The biggest takeaway here is that career development cannot be skipped over; it's an invaluable investment of time and resources. As we explore further in the "Career Decision processes" section, for career decisions to be successful, there needs to be in place a series of career development tasks that lead to the formation of a career identity supported by strong career self-efficacy and career decision-making efficacy.[10]

The figure below provides a closer look at these four core career development activities, which, overall, have been found to contribute to an individual's overall sense of life purpose.[11]

Career Decision Choice Map

Start
assessment of skills and interests

Career Exploration
multiple sectors and occupations considered based on skills and interests

NO

Decide on occupation(s) to explore further — YES

Career Planning
create goals and steps to move towards career choice

NO

Career path confimed? ←

YES

First Step
towards pursuing career

World of Work
IINFORMATION:
labor market info, work experience required, credentials needed for advancement
EXPERIENCES:
internships, job shadowing, observation

Career Choice
initial decision point about possible career to pursue based on exploration, planning process, and world of work info & experiences

YES ← Planning complete — NO

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Career Exploration

During career exploration, students engage with information and materials that help them better understand themselves and how their skills and interests might align with various occupations. These information flows may be informal or formal in nature and can come from a variety of sources, including parents, teachers, school counselors, other adults, and peers, as well as students' own experiences performing different roles and tasks in both work and non-work environments. The purpose of career exploration is to help students broaden their horizons as a precursor to focusing on potential pathways in support of their career decision process.[12] Not relying on one source is important even if it is a career counselor—it is challenging for any one person or resource to stay up to date on the wide array of career options, both those that currently exist and those predicted as part of the future labor market.

Help Young People Explore Careers With Self-Awareness and Intension

Free online career quizzes and assessment tools can help students identify potential careers while reflecting on who they are, what they care about, and what they might enjoy or feel fulfilled by. Students should consider questions such as: 1) What is the problem I want to help solve through my work? What is the need in society that my potential career can address? 2) What are my work values? How does who I am and what I've experienced affect my ideas about potential careers? 3) What lifestyle do I want to have? Do I envision supporting others with my salary? and 4) What career areas have I *not* considered?

Representative resources include:

Student-facing resources
- BigFuture Career Quiz (BigFuture)
- Identifying Career Goals: Which Work Values Matter Most (BigFuture)
- Department of Labor (DOL)
- CareerOneStop resources (CareerOneStop)
- O*Net OnLine (O*Net OnLine)
- Career Exploration resource (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Resources for adults supporting students
- Career Values: How to Identify Yours and Cultivate Success as a Professional (Indeed)
- Why Your Values Belong at Work (HBR.org)
- Career Exploration and Skill Development (Youth.gov)

Exploration activities should include internet research, using tools such as free, personalized career and postsecondary exploration and planning sites and social media. Students can explore career profiles that outline job requirements, potential salaries, and projected growth, and watch YouTube or TikTok videos of real people doing their jobs in the workplace or sharing their career journeys. But students also need real-world exploration where they learn through observation and direct

experience. Sometimes called work-based or career-connected learning, these options include job shadowing, career talks, informational interviews, and workplace tours. See "World of work information" section to learn more about this.

Career Planning

Career planning builds upon career exploration by helping students make sense of the information they are collecting about their own skills, interests, and preferences as well as the various occupations and work possibilities they have explored. Career planning is about helping students identify specific goals, actions, and timelines that get them closer to making concrete choices. Career planning develops goal-orientation cognitive capacities and the practice of mapping out specific steps to take toward a career goal.[13]

Build Up the Ability of Young People to Set Goals and Plan for Their Careers

Young people don't just need information; they need to build the skills and capacities to set goals, plan, and become more aware of their priorities and the steps to take to realize them.

Representative resources include:

Student-facing resources

- Career Planning Guide for High School Students (Study.com)
- Career Map Action Template (NYC Department of Education)
- Deciding Where to Live and Work (Khan Academy)
- Kick Start Your ILP (U.S. Department of Labor)

Resources for adults supporting students

- Career Planning for High Schoolers (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics)
- Major Clarity (Major Clarity)
- MyBestBets (MyBestBets and JFF)

World of Work Information

For young people to get to a career path decision, it is critical that they obtain information about and, ideally, experience what various occupations entail. Such information may come from parents, teachers, or other trusted adults who can help guide thinking and discussions about different types of work contexts. It may also come from informational interviews, mentoring, and targeted conversations about work with professionals.

A young person's understanding of the world of work can be shaped through formal career consulting resources provided at school or elsewhere as well as media images. It can also be formed through work experience (including part-time employment), work-based learning opportunities, internships, and volunteer or community service activities.[14] When world of work information provides rich, concrete, and nuanced details about potential career choices, it has been shown to promote stronger vocational or career identity, which in turn leads to more successful career choices.[15]

Connect Young People to World of Work Experiences

Experiential learning—learning by doing and reflecting on that doing—is one of the best ways for young people to absorb information about and understand potential career paths and what their work lives might look like in the future. A common form of experiential learning is work-based learning (WBL), which includes opportunities such as internships, service learning, and part-time work. To make WBL feasible and effective, educators, employers, career counselors, workforce boards, and adults in the community all have a role to play. The first step is to build links among all the actors to get them to communicate and brainstorm about what is possible.

Representative resources include:

Student-facing resources

- CareerSpring.com (CareerSpring.com)
- CareerVillage.org (CareerVilage.org)

Resources for adults supporting students

WBL, general

- WBL Framework (JFF)
- Work-Based Learning in High School (Edutopia)
- Work-Based Learning Experiences (Promising Practices)
- Promising Work-Based Learning Experiences for Youth (National Skills Association)
- Connecting Opportunity Youth and Employers Through Work-Based Learning (YouthBuild)

Workplace Visits

- Career and College Exploration Experiences: Planning for Success (JFF)

Mentoring

- Mentoring: At the Crossroads of Education, Business, and Community (EY and MENTOR)

Job Shadowing

- Complete Guide: Job Shadowing for High School Students (PrepScholar)

Informational Interviews

- How to Get the Most Out of an Informational Interview (AchieveAtlanta.org)
- The Power of Informational Interviews (Career Vision)
- A Complete Guide to Informational Interviews (Indeed)
- The Power of Networking Through Informational Interviews (High Point University)

Internships

- How to Find an Internship That Matters (BigFuture)

Career Field Trips

- Sample Lesson Plan for Field Trip for Career Exploration (WISELearn)

Career Choice Determination

As students develop greater self-awareness about their likes and dislikes, based on their own research, experience, and reflection, they become better prepared to make career decisions. With increased knowledge about career choices, what job roles entail, and what the workplace is like in general, students experience a stronger sense of confidence in making career choices.[16] Their career choices, or at least their first career choice, become much firmer and the path forward clarified. Again, keep in mind that even after an initial career choice is made and the student takes a first step toward that career, all or some of the other career development steps can and likely will be engaged as new information and experiences related to work and career are accumulated over a lifetime of work.

Support Students Making Sense of Their Career Journey

Young people need opportunities to organize their thinking, project their aspirations forward, highlight important results, and reflect on what they have learned and accomplished. There are many resources that can help you support young people as they envision, document, and make sense of their career journey.

Representative resources include:

Student-facing resources

- How to Make a Career Journal (Indeed)
- Self-Reflection: What It Is And Why It's Important For Your Career (Builtin)

Resources for adults supporting students

- Creating a Vision Board for Your Career (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau)
- Career tools for youth: Creating a portfolio (Michigan State University)
- How to Use Labor Market Information to Explore Careers (Liveabout)

How Do Young People Make Career Decisions?

Knowing the steps involved in career development is part of the puzzle, but it is also helpful to understand how young people make decisions generally and about careers specifically. Below we look at concepts like self-esteem, self-efficacy, career self-efficacy, career adaptability, and career decision self-efficacy to shed light on how educators, program directors, career counselors, employers, families, and other caring adults can best support and amplify the career decision-making of young people.

Brain and Psychosocial Development

As students move into adolescence, they encounter "more frequent and complex demands on independent decision-making."[17] Evidence from neuroscience research suggests that adolescents experience increased reliance on model-based learning[18] where a mental model is created to inform behavioral choices and actions.[19] Adolescent decision-making is further heightened by direct experiences and rewards even as some parts of decision-making processes are still underdeveloped (such as understanding how choices made in the present impact the future, having the ability to weigh current choices against possible outcomes, and being able to integrate positive and negative feedback in a productive manner to support decisions).[20]

During this period of brain development, young people are also developing their concept of themselves and their attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills, also known as their self-system.[21] This self-system plays a critical role in behavioral actions, including decision choices. Social cognitive theory[22] explains that behaviors are a dynamic interplay between an individual's internal mental processes, including thoughts and feelings, and the environment or social context in which the individual finds themselves (Bandura). **As a result, learning from observation or modeled behavior, direct experience, social or verbal persuasion, and emotional response become strong components that can influence decisions.**[23]

At the same time, an individual's internal mental process can thwart or amplify social learning toward desired decision outcomes. It is a person's belief in their own capabilities to achieve desired outcomes, or self-efficacy,[24] that is critical here. In the context of career development and career choices, self-efficacy has been explored as career self-efficacy and career decision self-efficacy. **Career self-efficacy** is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to engage in career development, choice, and adaptation behaviors.[25] **Career decision self-efficacy** is the specific belief in the ability to complete tasks related to making career decisions in a successful manner.[26]

These concepts become embedded in a larger theory of social cognitive career theory, which posits that career decisions and choice result from an **interaction between the social context and environment a person finds themselves in and an individual's personal**

characteristics.[27] This highlights the power of working with young people to create productive learning contexts to move them toward productive career decision outcomes.

Career Decision Processes

Career decisions for adolescents are not a simple matter of rationally assessing various options and possibilities about what career pathway to choose and which preparation options will best serve intended career outcomes. Young people need to be ready to decide, and that readiness may not be in place even as they graduate and enter their post high school lives. For career decisions to be successful, there needs to be in place a series of career development tasks that lead to the formation of a career identity supported by strong career self-efficacy and career decision-making efficacy.[28] Research suggests that if choices are made without these readiness foundations, decisions related to career will yield unsatisfactory outcomes, such as lost time and resources in going down wrong paths, misaligned and unmotivated training, and dissatisfying and unengaged work experiences.[29] Some of these outcomes have more significant financial and personal costs than others, and students furthest from opportunity are likely to bear the burden inequitably.

When are career decisions made?

The career decision process varies by person. While preadolescents may be engaged in career development activities especially related to interests, skills, and career exposure, human development realities suggest that decision-making processes should begin in earnest during adolescence, which starts at about age 13. This means for young people, post high school plans related to career path should be well underway by grades 11 or 12 and ideally should start just before or as they enter high school. A few young people may already be in a career or vocational training program or engaged in individualized education plans to prepare them for post high school life.[30]

While the first career decisions happen in adolescence and young adulthood, it is important to reemphasize that career decisions will be part of lifelong processes. As such, in addition to career efficacy and career decision efficacy, these young people ideally should also begin to show indicators of career adaptability that will serve them for the long term. Career adaptability is a set of abilities that allows individuals to address changing work contexts and conditions by animating continued learning and regulation in one's career direction.[31] Conceptually, it includes concern about one's future, curiosity about future self and possibilities, control over one's career future, and confidence in one's ability to pursue goals and aspirations.[32]

Since career decision readiness is unique to each person, using formal measures of career self-efficacy,[33] career decision efficacy,[34] and career adaptability,[35] along with a review of participation in career development tasks, may clarify what supports and resources an individual adolescent may need.

Measuring Where Young People Are at in Their Career Journey

While assessments related to career may not end up on high school transcripts, understanding where students are at in their career journey can help educators, employers, and others determine what programs and resources might best serve the needs of young people.

Representative resources include:

Resources for adults supporting students

- Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale (Mind Garden)
- Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (Vocopher)

Who (and what) influences career decisions?

Career decisions are influenced by both personal characteristics as well as contextual or environmental supports and barriers.[36] Specifically, career decision self-efficacy has been shown to have a positive correlation to career exploration goals and career decidedness. Additionally, career decision self-efficacy is positively correlated with environmental supports, such as career information and career role models, and a personality trait of conscientiousness. Conscientiousness likely brings organization and persistence to career development tasks.[37] Environmental supports are also positively correlated to career exploratory goals.[38]

As detailed earlier, engaging young people in career development tasks grounded in identity explorations can strengthen the internal processes and resources needed to become good at career decisions regardless of innate personality traits. These activities are needed especially for young people from low-income backgrounds or minoritized groups, or those receiving special education services who may need extra supports to overcome contextual barriers.[39] Young people dealing with current or past trauma likely will need interventions to rebuild trust, overcome a sense of powerlessness, and counter a host of other cognitive, affective, behavioral, and somatic-physiological effects.[40]

Consider the Career Decision-Making Needs of All Young People

Not every young person comes to career decision-making activities with the same needs or background. Make sure to address the context and potential barriers faced by students.

Representative resources include:

Resources for adults supporting students

- Career Development Needs of First-Generation Students (NACE)

- Preparing Students of Color for the Future Workforce (Center for American Progress)

- Career Planning Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Supporting Youth With Disabilities Through the Career Planning Process (Center on Transition Innovations)

- Building Trust and an Inclusive Culture for Youth Into the Future of Work (Forbes)

Family, peers, school, and other social realms are the key contextual or environmental influencers of young people.[41] Adults in family contexts can set expectations, model work behaviors and attitudes, and provide key guidance and support to adolescents as they engage in career development tasks.[42] However, not all adolescents, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have adult family members who can provide them with these supports and modeling and expose them to a range of possible career opportunities or pathways.[43] This is where trusted adults in other settings— school, work, and community—can offer supports similar to those provided by adult family members.[44] In schools, staff such as guidance counselors and career and technical education teachers are formally responsible for career development tasks. But all teachers and other school personnel can support career exploration, world of work exposure, and career planning opportunities. They can also model work behaviors and attitudes and set expectations.[45]

In addition, near peers or older siblings may provide some support to influence the career decision process.[46] This may be especially true for students from families without family members with postsecondary degrees or credentials that may not be able to provide as many career decisions supports.[47]

Caring Adults and Near Peers Can Support Career Decision-Making

Adults, peers, and near peers have a strong influence on how young people work toward career decisions.

Representative resources include:

Resources for adults supporting students

- The School Counselor and Career Development (American School Counselor Association)

- Mentoring: A Critical Support Strategy for Youth Career Engagement and Workforce Development (Mentoring.org)

- Creating a Youth-Friendly Workplace: Quick Tips for Employers (Sacramento Works)

- New Study Explores How Peer Mentoring Enhances Students' Career Goals (The Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring)

- National Career Development Association Professional Development Opportunities (National Career Development Association)

While personality traits and trusted adults have a strong influencing effect on young people, the range of career choices and opportunities available to individuals both in the present and in the future are constrained by labor market and economic realities. Shifting technological and social changes, especially related to automation, are transforming the career choice landscape. Young people and their trusted adult networks likely lack quality information about these future trends that would help them navigate their choice options. There is an opportunity to build these resources at the local and regional levels. Educators can connect to local workforce boards, employer groups, and career experts to keep abreast of shifting trends.

Strategies for Connecting Educators With Workforce Boards, Employer Groups, and Career Experts

There are a lot of opportunities for K-12 educators to connect with employers in their local and regional areas as well as other experts who are working to build workforce systems.

Representative resources include:

Resources for adults supporting students

- How to Use Labor Market Information to Explore Careers (LiveAbout)

- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Resources for K-12 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics)

- The Importance of Workforce Labor Market Information (U.S. Department of Labor)

- 50 State Comparison: Education and Workforce Development Connections (Education Commission of the States)

- Connecting K-12 to Careers (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation)

What information impacts career decisions? Voices from the field

Much of the information that impacts career decisions has been explored through research around concepts like career development, career construction, and social cognitive career theory. However, interviews with educators and program providers can further illuminate what impacts career decisions, including the following:

- ***Belief in one's own ability to succeed.*** Terrill Covey at the Stafford Learning Center in New Hampshire works with many students who are addressing emotional, behavioral, or physical barriers in their school settings. For those students approaching graduation, he focuses on their post high school graduation plans and their need to build social emotional capacity, to create a sense of self-determination that, in turn, can lead to increased self-efficacy. As discussed earlier, students need to believe they can plan and make decisions related to their careers as a precursor to making those choices.

- ***Self-awareness of skills, interests, values, and aspirations.*** As detailed earlier, career decisions are part of a developmental process. Adolescents and young adults need to explore their skills, interests, and values; connect those to possible career fields; and then narrow down their choices to a few occupations within their fields of interests. Scott Emerick at YouthBuild Philly shared how with his students, he starts with what they care about, what

they are interested in, and what excites them.[48] From there, students can start to explore how those intrinsically motivating elements might realize themselves in occupations.

- ***Details about career fields and occupations.*** Jeremy Thomas at the Goodwill Excel Center High School in Central Texas noted that many of the 18- to 20-year-olds he works with often have only partial information about what jobs entail or what work looks like day to day. He shared the example of a student who wanted to be a phlebotomist and got far down the career exploration path before realizing that they really didn't like dealing with blood. Or another student who participated in certified nursing assistant training because they wanted to work in a hospital only to find out that many CNAs work in health settings outside of hospitals. Thomas said students need help finding information—especially information that has been vetted and is trusted.

- ***Training, costs, and time horizon.*** Once a narrow set of possible career occupations has been identified, students need information on how they might best prepare for those occupations. What additional skills might they need? What type of training is required? How long is the training? How much does it cost to get trained? What will their first job pay? What does advancement look like? Will additional training be needed, and if so, how much does that cost? Can they work while getting prepared? What additional support might they need to succeed? Thomas shared that he had a student who planned to go to a community college for two years after high school and after that become a lawyer. The student had no idea that to be a lawyer required at least seven years or more of training. Emerick noted that some students aspire to careers that ultimately don't fit with their economic desires and the trade-offs that need to be made to pursue them.

- ***Firsthand knowledge of work.*** Information and support are critical elements in adolescent career decision-making, especially in environments where trusted adults can use social persuasion and tap into emotional responses. But young people also benefit from direct experience and observation, both of which are supported through engaging in work environments. This might be in the form of actual employment in a part-time job, a paid internship, job shadowing, or interviews or conversations with individuals in targeted occupations. Covey, Thomas, and Emerick all said they place students in real-world work environments made possible by relationships with employers or key industry partners. These direct experiences can help solidify a career choice or highlight a mismatch or misalignment leading to a new choice.

Sophan's and David's Career Decision Journeys

Sophan and David were fortunate to engage in strong career development tasks during high school that helped them build their career identities. Both graduated feeling confident about their initial career decision choices and the first steps toward preparing for those choices.

As she started grade 11, Sophan's college advising and planning included activities that tapped into her life aspirations, interests, and skills, which she was then able to map to possible careers using some career planning websites recommended by her English teacher. The teacher had incorporated career development tasks related to career identity into his creative writing module. Sophan was also able to use these insights to identify a community service activity that allowed her to work with young kids in a creative arts afterschool program. During that experience, she learned about art therapy as an occupation from her supervisor. For a social studies class learning about the labor movement, students were asked to interview three people from different industries on how they experienced their work lives. Sophan found the work a neighbor did as a community health outreach worker interesting. She was moved by the purpose this woman found in her work.

By grade 12, Sophan was learning that she really wanted a career that helped her serve people in her community but also something that led to a solid financial future and would fulfill her need for academic achievement. After exploring a range of occupations, their growth potential, and compensation, she felt becoming a clinical psychologist working with children experiencing trauma would check all her boxes. With this information in hand, Sophan felt more confident identifying potential colleges. At the same time, she wanted to make sure those colleges provided the opportunity to learn more than psychology in case she changed her mind about career choices.

David's career decision journey was a little different. David tapped into his skills, interests, and aspirations through conversations with his older cousins and some friends of his older siblings. He was particularly interested in those near peers who didn't end up going to college right after high school. One of his sister's friends had done a year with AmeriCorps, working with others to fix up school rooms in and around Eugene, Oregon. One of his cousins was currently doing HVAC work with a small business nearby. David loved how each of these peers talked about working with others and fixing things in a concrete way. He was also fascinated by the machines at a local advanced manufacturing company he visited on a STEM club school field trip. He even had an opportunity to talk to several workers on the floor about what they were doing.

David's guidance counselor suggested he visit the local CareerOneStop to see if there were resources that could help him find out more about careers in which he could work with others, were in advanced manufacturing, or had more hands-on aspects to them. While at CareerOneStop, David learned about an advanced manufacturing credential being offered at the local community college. He convinced his parents to let him enroll in the program and take classes nights and weekends.

The program even incorporated an internship at the same advanced manufacturing company he visited on the earlier field trip.

As David was entering the middle of his senior year, his first career decision was to move into the workforce to explore advanced manufacturing. David's parents were supportive of his choice but also wanted him to keep college in his line of sight. Luckily, a career pathway web resource he found while researching advanced manufacturing showed exactly how the skills from this career choice mapped to advancement pathways and the related associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and training beyond.

Conclusion

While Sophan and David are fictional composites, the challenges they face are shared by many high school students. Standing at the edge of a major life transition, Jobs for the Future (JFF) and BigFuture want these young people to confidently step into their next life phase with agency and purpose. It is is the job of schools, parents, employers, and other caring adults to create environments that fill them with hope, motivation, excitement, and confidence. Sharing a guide such as this one can be a step towards aligning these critical caring adults around research-informed ways to provide useful information, resources, and supports for helping high school students weigh their options and make well-informed decisions that lead to successful first career moves based on their skills, interests, and goals. Together, they should help young people navigate this complex ecosystem and find their most fulfilling paths—whatever they may be. After all, there is no "one right choice" or "one correct path."

Endnotes

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