

Identifying The "Root Cause" Of Mukwonago High School Graduates'

Inability To Make a Career Choice And Form

A Career Plan

by

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ABSTRACT

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The study explores the attitudes, processes, and influences on high school students as they make their career decisions. Evidenced by the high college dropout rate and frequent career changes observed in young adults the needs and wants of the students were not being met. Students need to take responsibility for the decision-making process. Students need to have identified a career and have a tentative career plan before leaving high school.

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Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

Introduction

It was in the early 1970s that Carl enrolled in a two-year program at the local technical college. At age 28, he was a non-traditional student. The only family income came from a part-time job, augmented by a small nest egg from the unskilled job he had quit so he could attend school full time. With a wife and four young children, there were a lot of bills to pay and life was difficult. However, after a very long and arduous struggle, he was able to complete his program and start a skilled full-time job.

In contrast, his classmates were all recent high school graduates enrolled just three months after their senior year. Their lives were seemingly uninterrupted as they moved from high school to college, unencumbered by family and financial responsibilities.

Now 30 years later, the roles of the players have reversed: The non-traditional student of the 1970s is now the average student (Richardson & King, 1998) who is entering college. The sacrifices made by those returning to school are just as difficult now as they were for Carl in the middle 1970s.

Klein (1990) noted that the number of 18- to 22-year-old students was declining as older adults were re-entering the educational system. Now, however, the demographics of the student population appear to be changing. The U.S. Department of Education projects that: "The proportion of students who

are 18- to 24-years old, which fell from 59 percent in 1988 to 55 percent in 1996, is projected to be 60 percent by the year 2008” (Gerald & Hussar, 1998).

An article by Hiebert (1993) on the importance of making a career decision states that: “Choosing a career is perhaps second only to the choice of mate in terms of the pervasiveness of the impact on one’s life” (p. 5). In fact, the study noted that some people have gone one step further and said: “That career is probably not the second most important life decision that people make but the first, in terms of the far-reaching overarching effect on person’s personal life satisfaction” (p. 5).

According to the New Millennium Project (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998), quality of life in general will rise with increased educational achievement and, correspondingly, wages. This report outlined a multitude of other personal areas that are affected, ranging from an increased quality of civic life to an improved quality of life for offspring. In general, as educational achievement rises, so will the individual's quality of life.

With so much physical and emotional well-being riding on one’s career choice, there is a need for secondary school students who have not yet decided on a career to do so before they leave high school. Gray and Herr (1995) suggested that high school graduates were mature and realistic enough to have “made a tentative decision to prepare to enter a particular field of work” (p. 114). Yet, almost two-thirds of the graduating class is making the same choice by: “attending college to gain entry into the professional occupations-but certainly they cannot all have the same abilities or personalities” (Ibid. p. 115).

It appears to be society's belief that: "The only hope for future economic security for today's youth is at least a four-year college degree obtained with the expectation that it will lead to a good high paying job in the professions" (Gray & Herr, p. 9). Obviously, the student with the academic ability should go to post secondary schooling, if able. However, the reality is only 63 percent of the students will complete college (Adelman, 1999). For the unsuccessful students, the message of college equaling success that is being sent by parents, teachers, peers, and the media might be without regard to an individual student's academic ability (Gray & Herr).

In addition, college students have vague plans and are dependant on contingencies. A study conducted by Haggstrom (1991) demonstrated confusion in the plans of recent high school graduates, as their progress is, "marked by flux, false steps and changes of plans" (p. 4).

Gray & Herr presented the following situation:

The hard reality is that a growing number of college degree holders may never see a positive return on their higher education investment; they may never get a job that allows them to recoup their higher education investment.

(p. 100)

Thus, the resulting debt and emotional distress from disrupted plans and the effect of lower earning potential could adversely affect the student's quality of life.

Root Cause

A study by Latanison (1995) observed that determining the root cause of a problem is not an easy task. The root cause is not the simplistic or sometimes obvious cause of the problem. Rather, the systems engineers from Decision Systems, Inc. (1998) define it as; "...root causes of problems that when removed prevent the problem." With determined research, however, the cause of the cause (i.e. the root cause) might be uncovered. The related studies of Matier & Larson (1995), Latanison, and (Harkins & Otto, 1990) used similar research techniques to uncover the root cause(s) in their studies.

Problem Statement

State and National statistics suggest that many college bound students at Mukwonago High School might not be making realistic or mature career choices and career plans as part of their academic preparation. Without a career choice, they cannot plot an accurate career plan. Both the career choice and subsequent career plan are an integral part of a high school education, without which post-secondary planning is meaningless. Subsequently, the students at Mukwonago High School need to accurately identify a career choice and form a career plan. Each year of indecision has both a financial and human cost and the resulting delay could adversely affect their quality of life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify why the students at Mukwonago High School appear unable to make both an accurate and realistic career choice and form a career plan before graduation.

Objectives

The objectives of this research is to:

1) Explore the decision-making process of Mukwonago High School students and identify the root cause for any delay in their career decision.

2) Identify the root cause for inaccurate or unrealistic career decisions made by Mukwonago High School students.

3) Carefully separate and identify symptoms of the problem(s) from the root cause.

Limitations

The data was collected from the graduating class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School. Thus, the results can be generalized only to the sample population.

Significance of the Problem

Delayed entry into a planned career is costly in both human and financial terms. The recent high school graduates who made an incorrect decision, or who do not make a career decision at all, will typically take a job(s) and generally explore the world of work in a vague attempt to find themselves. It is very important that recent high school graduates choose a career and actively pursue it during those first few critical years after graduation. If they don't, their loss of career focus is thus multiplied by the number of years of career indecision, and that subsequently could negatively affect their quality of life.

Definitions of terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms are defined:

Career Plan: A comprehensive list containing specific events that culminates with the completion of a degree(s) and/or entry into a chosen occupation.

Recent High School Graduates: Young adults age 18- to 20 who have recently received a high school diploma.

Quality of Life: Overall positive effect of the physical and psychological lifetime experiences as compared to the perceived minimum standards of life and lifestyle in the United States.

Root Cause: Not the superficial symptom of a problem, but the true underlying cause. It is usually used to describe the causal source of a difficult or complex problem. A systematic process is used to uncover all causal components that, in turn, reveal the cause of the systemic problem.

Traditional College Students: Young adults who are 18- to 22 years old.

Summary

Making a career decision might prove difficult, as there are many interacting situations to be considered. Proceeding without a career choice or delaying a career decision could negatively affect the students' quality of life. Chapter 2 will further discuss the complexity involved in a career decision.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter deals with a range of topics related to the career decision-making process utilized by high school students. Student influencers, high school preparation, and post secondary educational opportunities will be discussed.

Career Choice

Career choices made by students are important life decisions. From a Gallup study of 25 goals of education, the public rated as third in importance: “developing an understanding about different kinds of jobs and careers, including their requirements and reward” (Tech Directions, 1995, p. 9). One of the biggest challenges that students face is choosing a career and the necessary career planning required.

For example, the bold print of a headline in Communication News (1998) reads: “Grads Regret Career Choice.” The survey given by George Mason University and the Potomac Knowledge Way found that 40 percent of the respondents complained that their careers were not right for them. A majority of respondents were in high-tech careers with one in three predicting a career change in the future.

A survey cited in Communication News stated: “Almost half of college-educated workers ages 30-55 would choose a different major if they could do it over, with most saying that they would focus on science or technology the

second time around” (p. 8). Some of the job dissatisfaction can be contributed to the changing workplace.

Career Aspirations

An article titled: “The Occupational Aspirations and Expectations of Senior High School Students” (Davey, 1993, p. 1), reported that young adults set high career goals. It listed the most frequently desired occupation as being physician (15.6 percent), lawyer (15.3 percent), and professional athlete (8.1 percent). The remainder of the careers included, secretary, veterinarian, social worker, musician, biologist, nurse, teacher, and engineer.

The study also focused on a more realistic goal identified as expectations titled: “The Most Frequently Expected Occupation” (Davey). The occupations that topped the list were the lawyer (9.3 percent) and physician (9.2 percent), with the balance of the occupations centered in the professional ranks.

Students were also asked to identify potential obstacles to their cited occupations. The number one obstacle listed was not being able to afford the education (25 percent), followed by there not being many jobs available (17.3 percent), having to move too far for education/job (11.5 percent), and being discouraged by others (8.3 percent). Notably absent from the top of this list were the academic requirements associated with professional jobs.

All students want to live the American dream, however, they need a reality check before entering college. Gray & Herr (1995) pointed out that many of “their plans are inconsistent with reality” (p. 4). Additionally, Gray & Herr concluded that the average student’s career aspirations and plans “are

inconsistent with both their high school academic record and labor market projections” (p. 4).

Career Maturity

An article by Kerka (1998) covered the subject of career maturity, or the readiness of young adults to make appropriate career decisions. Discussed were the complex interaction and influences of age, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. The study found that students lack guidance, socialization, resources, information, role models and experience. It recommended that career counseling take place inside of the cultural context; however, it also cautioned that one must not assume that everyone holds the same values, goals and experiences. Additionally, one must be sensitive to the interactions of all the variables and the fact that situations can be dynamic and very complex.

Gray and Herr (1995) discussed adolescent career immaturity and concluded that high school students were at an appropriate age and should be able to make a tentative career decision. Specifically:

According to the model, a mature individual should have moved from fantasy in the elementary grades to realism at the time of graduation from high school-realism in terms of having made a “tentative” decision to prepare to enter a particular field of work. Importantly, this decision...(is) a “realistic” assessment of skills and/or preparation at the time of high school graduation.

(p. 114)

Preparation for College

For the college bound student, taking the right coursework is essential, as is selecting a challenging and rigorous curriculum. The courses a student chooses in high school influences his or her chance of successfully completing a baccalaureate degree. Completion of a math course higher than Algebra II, for example, has the strongest influence (Adelman, 1999). As students select their high school courses, they must realistically look at the rigorousness of their classes and be realistic enough to understand the relationship of this situation. According to Adelman's report, successful completion of coursework that has academic intensity and a quality pre-college curriculum were the best indicators of success. In fact, for students who started "...in highly selective colleges, the rate exceeds 90 percent" (Ibid, p. 5).

Adelman reported that many incoming freshmen were not academically prepared for college level work, and special classes were available for these students. Remedial courses in reading, writing, and mathematics were offered in 78 percent of the higher education institutions (Adelman, 1999). In fact, three of 10 college freshmen were enrolled in at least one remedial course.

There was even more support for the academic preparedness of high school students, as discussed in an article by a Baker & Velez (1996). They state: "Many students leave college when they fail to meet the academic standards of their schools. Their failure, in turn, can be traced back to their poor academic performance in high school and their lower academic ability" (p. 92). Certainly,

some of the students were not realistic in the assessment of their academic preparation or ability.

Gray & Herr (1995) stated that many average high school students were academically unprepared for college level work. Unfortunately, the career advice given the to average student “is totally out of sync both with their high school academic records and with the labor market they face if they actually graduate with a 4-year college degree” (p. xi).

Parental and Family Influence

The process of family interaction and its influence on the children can have a long-term impact on the latter’s career choices. Parents are the role models who shape attitudes, goals, aspirations, and values through the interaction of many variables on the family process (Lankard, 1995). In fact, Lankard suggests that: “Family background provides the basis from which their career planning and decision making evolve” (p. 1).

Family dynamics, however, are not without their pitfalls, as pointed out by Middleton and Loughead (1993). They warn that one must never underestimate the dynamics of parental and family involvement in the career guidance process. This Career Education article points out the impacts of family dynamics, which can be positive, negative or even neutral in nature. It warns of the potential pitfalls of getting too close to family situations. Teenage children, however, still seek counsel and respect their parents’ input and wisdom. The report by Middleton and Lougerhead concluded by saying: “...an impressive amount of

career growth and maturity is possible when a coalition is fostered between parents and adolescent children” (p. 171).

A study by Davey (1993) identified who young adults considered to be the most significant and influential person in their life. Parents accounted for 55 percent of the total score, mother (30 percent) and father (25 percent). The rest of the list follows in order: friend (20 percent), other family (7.5 percent), teacher (6.5 percent), guidance counselor (3 percent), other (3 percent), and no one (5 percent). The data was adjusted to reflect a total score equaling 100, as many students listed more than one significant person.

Career Considerations

Contained in report by Snyder & Wirt (1998) was the following statement: “Between 1986 and 1995, high school completers from high-income families were more likely than completers from low-income families to go directly to college after completing high school.” Within the same study was this statistic: “86 percent of 1992 high school graduates from high-income families were academically qualified for college admission at a four-year institution, compared to 68 percent of middle-income and 53 percent of low-income graduates.” The study did not give a reason for the statistical significance of these facts.

A quote by Gray & Herr (1995) stated: “A widespread misconception is that, in the future, most jobs will require a college degree” (p. 97). In fact, the article pointed out that by the year 2005, only 21 percent of the nation’s jobs will require a college degree. Why, then, do the nation’s high schools continue to send

such large numbers of its graduates on to four-year colleges (Gray & Herr, 1995)?

Graduation Report

David J. Ward, senior vice president for academic affairs at the University of Wisconsin System, reported that the baccalaureate graduation rate was 51.8 percent over a six-year period for full time students who start at a University of Wisconsin institution. He also noted that this figure compared to the national rate of 47.6 percent (Ward, 2000, p. 1). Additionally, he said that an optional four-year degree graduation contract was available to students who wanted to shorten their time spent in school.

Mukwonago School District reported that the graduation rate for the graduating class of 1997-98 was 92.3 percent (Strobel, 1999, p. 7). The postgraduation follow-up revealed that 57 percent planned on attending a 4-year college, 20 percent indicated plans for a 2-year technical college, and 2 percent were bound for a 1-year technical college or job training. Students who were not attending post secondary schools indicated plans with the military 2.7 percent, employment 7.1 percent, seeking employment 1.2 percent, and 10 percent miscellaneous.

The School to Work coordinator at Mukwonago High School reported that for the Class of 2000 there were 402 student graduates, from a senior class of 436 students, with 4 students attending summer school. The tentative graduation rate would be 92.2 percent (M. Blodgett, personal communication, July 12, 2000).

Summary

The process of choosing a career is a difficult task that includes many variables. This chapter presented some of the variables affecting the decision-making process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This descriptive study utilized a survey methodology. The survey sample contained seniors from the graduating class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School. Specific information was sought pertaining to the attitudes, processes, and influencers on students as they considered careers. One of the survey goals was to identify how the students perceived their progress toward making a career decision, career choice and career planning efforts.

Methodology

This descriptive study utilized a survey instrument. The sample population was Mukwonago High Schools graduating class of 2000. The survey collected demographic information from the students, as well as responses to Likert-scale statements about the students' attitudes and perceptions toward their career decision-making process. The survey included a section dealing with who has influence over a student's career decision. The last section was limited to students who were planning to attend post secondary schools.

Constraints

There were several constraints on the study. Timing took advantage of a late distribution date of April 19, 2000, ensuring a minimal adjustment for students who made last minute career decisions. It was given at the latest date possible to avoid the confusion associated with final exams and graduation activities.

There was an unavoidable conflict for the students who were not yet 18 years old. Permission slips were required for this grouping. Because of time constraints for the distribution of the survey, obtaining parental permission documentation was not feasible. The number of affected students was expected to be small due to the late timing. There were additional unavoidable situations for students who were absent on the day of the survey distribution, were unwilling to participate or made an insincere effort to complete the survey.

Source of Data

The graduating Class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School consisted of 436 students, 12 of who were early (December) graduates. A pool of 424 graduates was available for the survey.

Instrumentation

A survey instrument was utilized for data gathering and a five-point Likert-scale was used for scoring. The five categories were: disagree, mildly disagree, neutral, mildly agree, and agree. The survey contained a total of 42 questions, including one open-ended question.

The survey was specifically constructed for this study by the researcher. The intention was to elicit honest, straightforward responses from the students about their attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, it contained a small section dealing with the issue of who influences the students' decision-making process.

Survey Administration

The survey was given during the homeroom hour on Wednesday, April 19, 2000. According to the school calendar, there were three days before spring

break and six weeks before graduation day. The timing of the survey was chosen because it coincided with the conclusion of the schools' career-counseling efforts.

Interpretation of Data

UW-Stout's Computer User Support Services compiled the surveys and provided the statistical results. Chapter 4 contains the statistical results of the survey.

Summary

Chapter 3 presented the methodology used to survey the senior class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School. The survey was designed to elicit honest and straightforward responses to questions and statements surrounding the students' career decision-making process.

Chapter 4

Survey Results

Introduction

Contained within chapter 4 are the statistical results that were compiled from a survey given to the graduating class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School. Background demographic information precedes the results and note about cross tabulation results. The bulk of the chapter contains statistical data laid out in the same sequential order as the survey. The results statistically present the attitudes and perceptions of the students as it pertains to their career decision-making process.

Problem Restated

Mukwonago High School students need to both accurately and realistically identify a career choice and develop a workable career plan before graduation day.

Student Demographics and Response Rate

From the students in the graduating class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School there were 436 students, 12 were early (December) graduates. There were, potentially, 424 students available to take survey on May 19th. Completed surveys were received from 265 students. Of the surveys that were returned 14 were not included in the statistical data, 11 for being incomplete and 3 were unusable. The survey contained 131 female and 120 male respondents. The overall percentage of participating students was 63 percent.

Parent Demographics

The educational level of the respondents' parents fit into four distinct groupings. Grouping No. 1 consisted of a high school diploma or less and represented 25.9 percent of the parents. Grouping No. 2 consisted of some postsecondary schooling and represented 26.6 percent of the parents. Grouping No. 3 consisted of one parent with a BS/MS degree and represented 24.9 percent of the parents. Grouping No. 4 consisted of both parents with a BS/MS degree and represented 23.6 percent of the parents (See table 1).

Table 1

Parents' educational level of Mukwonago High School seniors

Response	Percent
High school or less	25.9
Some post secondary	26.6
One parent with BS/MS	24.9
Both parents with BS/MS	23.6

Cross Tabulation Data

The survey results were cross tabulated with the four educational levels of the parents and to the gender of the respondents. There were no significant results from the educational level cross tabulation. In some instances the gender cross tabulation was potentially significant and the results were noted.

Survey Results

The high school seniors in question No. 5 were asked what kind of student they considered themselves to be. The response was that 67.1 percent are an “A” or “B” student, 29.7 percent considered themselves an average “C” grade student, and 3.2 percent claimed to fit neither category.

The respondents were asked in question No. 6 if they had definitely made their career decision and knew exactly what they want to do in life. The response was yes at 55.6 percent and no at 44.4 percent (See table 2).

Table 2

I have definitely made my career decision and know what I want to do in life

Response	Percent
Yes	55.6
No	44.4

The students were asked in question No. 7 what grade they were in school when they made their career choice. The data shows that 43.7 percent had not yet made their career choice (See table 3).

Table 3

What grade school were you when you made your final career choice?

Response	Percent	Accumulative
9 th grade	5.3	5.3
10 th grade	6.1	11.4
11 th grade	18	29.4
12 th grade	26.9	56.3
“soon”	30.6	86.9
“long way to go”	13.1	100

The participants were asked how confident they felt about working in their anticipated career field. The confidence level of the respondents was 83.9 percent with either a response of agree or mildly agree. Disagreeing with the statement were 2 percent of the students (See table 4).

Table 4

I feel confident that will enjoy working in my chosen career

Response	Percentage
Agree	56.2
Mildly agree	27.7
Neutral	14.1
Mildly disagree	.8
Disagree	1.2

Question No. 11 asked whether the students' believed their career choice would eventually help them meet their financial expectations and life goals. The

students showed a confidence level of 87.9 percent either agreeing, or mildly agreeing with this statement (See table No. 5).

Table 5

My career choice will eventually help me meet my financial expectations and life goal(s)

Response	Percentage
Agreement	58.2
Mildly agree	29.7
Neutral	8.8
Mildly disagree	2.0
Disagree	1.2

The response to question No. 13 showed that 28.2 percent of the students surveyed were in disagreement or were neutral in reference to the statement that they had taken an active role in making their career decision (See table 6).

Table 6

I have taken an active role in making my career decision

Response	Percentage	Accumulative
Agree	41.9	41.9
Mildly agree	29.8	71.7
Neutral	19.8	91.5
Mildly disagree	5.6	97.1
Disagree	2.8	100

The high school seniors' response to question No. 14 was that 56.2 percent agreed or mildly agreed that they did not need anyone's help in deciding what career to pursue. A breakdown of the specific responses can be found in table 7.

Table 7

I did not need anyone's help in deciding what career to pursue

Response	Percentage
Agree	29.3
Mildly agree	26.9
Neutral	18.1
Mildly disagree	18.5
Disagree	7.2

Question No. 15 also relates to question No. 14 and asks if the respondent had spent time researching or deciding his or her career. The response to this question varied (See table 8).

Table 8

I have spent an adequate amount of time researching and deciding my career

Response	Percent
Agreement	17.7
Mildly agreed	34.9
Neutral	28.1
Mildly disagree	13.3
Disagreement	6.0

The respondents were asked if their career decision was not significantly influenced by anyone else and was entirely their own decision. The response to this question was mixed, with the students unable to either agree or disagree (See table 9).

Table 9

My career decision was not significantly influenced by anyone else and it is entirely my own decision

Response	Percent
Agree	27.8
Mildly agree	22.2
Neutral	24.2
Mildly disagree	19.0
Disagree	6.9

Question No. 18 asks the student if they were emotionally mature enough to choose a career that will meet my life goals. In response to this question, 92.8 percent of students agreed, or mildly agreed that they were mature enough to choose a career (See table 10).

Table 10

I am emotionally mature enough to choose a career that will meet my life goals

Response	Percentage
Agree	58.5
Mildly agreed	34.3
Neutral	3.6
Mildly disagree	2.8
Disagree	.8

The participants were asked if their high school experience had adequately prepared them to be able to choose a career and form action plan. The students' response to this question appears to be mixed (See table 11).

Table 11

High school has adequately prepared me to be able to choose a career and form an action plan to work toward that career

Response	Percent
Agree	16.1
Mildly agree	22.2
Neutral	26.6
Mildly disagree	21.0
Disagree	14.1

Students were asked if it is reasonable to expect a high school senior to be able to make a career decision by the end of his or her senior year. The students responded with 48 percent either disagreeing or mildly disagreeing with the statement (See table 12).

Table 12

It is reasonable to expect a high school senior to be able to make his/her career decision by the end of his/her senior year

Response	Percent
Agree	13.9
Mildly agree	18.4
Neutral	19.7
Mildly disagree	24.6
Disagree	23.4

The participants were asked in question No. 22 if they felt confident that their career decision was right for them. They responded with 68.3 percent either agreeing or mildly agreeing that their career choice was right for them (See table 13).

Table 13

I feel confident that my career decision is right for me

Response	Percent
Agree	41.6
Mildly agreed	26.7
Neutral	25.9
Mildly disagree	2.5
Disagree	3.3

Question No. 23 asked who was the most helpful in reaching their career decision. The choices were mother, father, relative, school counselor, teacher, sibling, friend, and other. Respondents were asked to limit the number of responses to no more than three choices. The average number of responses was 1.6 choices. For ease of understanding, the results have been adjusted and were based on a scale of 100. For instance, parents accounted for 47.8 percent of the total number of responses. The extended family accounted for 59.3 percent of the total number of responses (See table 14).

Table 14

Who has been the most helpful in reaching your career decision?

Response	Percentage
Mother	25.3
Father	22.5
Friend	11.7
Teacher	11.1
Relative	6.4
Sibling	5.1
School counselor	4.0
Other	14.0

The respondents were asked if their parents had always wanted them to go to a four-year college. The yes response was 70.2 percent and the balance of the group answered no at 29.8 percent.

The next series of three questions asks the students if they were perceived as college material. The first group asked to judge the students is their friends, secondly their parents, and lastly themselves (See table 15).

Table 15

...believe that I am “college material”

	<u>Friends</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Student personally</u>
Agree	51.2	64.1	61.4
Mildly agree	18	15.9	18.3
Neutral	20.1	13.9	12.2
Mildly disagree	3.3	1.6	2.4
Disagree	7.4	4.5	5.7

The high school seniors were asked if their parents approved their career plans. The students' response was that 85.3 percent were either in agreement or mildly agreeing that their parents approved (See table 16).

Table 16

My parents approve of my career plans

Response	Percentage
Agree	69.0
Mildly agree	16.3
Neutral	12.7
Mildly disagree	1.2
Disagree	.8

Only the students attending postsecondary schools were asked to complete the last eight questions No. 35 through No. 42. The students were then asked if they were planning to attend school by the fall semester of 2000. The yes response was 90.2 percent and the no response was 9.8 percent.

The students were asked if they believe that they have what it takes to complete a course of study and obtain a degree. The majority of 91.3 percent agreed or mildly agreed that they have what it takes (See table 17).

The student respondents of Mukwonago High School intend to send 76 percent of its graduates onto college. The respondents showed that 8.2 were not planning to attend any postsecondary schooling (See table 18).

Table 17

I believe that I have what it takes to complete a course of study and obtain a degree

Response	Percentage	Accumulative
Agree	74.7	74.7
Mildly agree	16.6	91.3
Neutral	6.6	97.9
Mildly disagree	1.7	99.6
Disagree	.4	100

Table 18

Post secondary schooling plans of MHS students

Response	Percentage	Accumulative
4-year college	65	65
2-year Technical or Community College	21	86
1-year Technical or Trade School	2	88
Other	3	91
Not attending	9	100

Summary

This chapter presented the statistical results of a survey given to the graduating class of 2000 from Mukwonago High School. The data from the individual respondents were evaluated on a percent basis in relation to the sample population.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was conducted to further understand the career decision-making process of students at Mukwonago High School. Results indicated that many might be making inaccurate and unrealistic career choices during high school. Students who attend a post secondary school without an identified career choice potentially jeopardize the successful completion of a degree. Subsequently, the Mukwonago High School students need to accurately identify a career and form a career plan before graduation day. Each year of indecision beyond high school potentially has a financial and human cost and that resulting delay could adversely affect a graduate's quality of life.

Summary

Ninety-one percent (See table 18) of the students surveyed were planning to attend a post secondary school. A 4-year college was the destination for 65 percent of the students, while 21 percent chose a 2-year technical or community college, 2 percent selected a 1-year technical or trade school, and 3 percent indicated other plans.

Students were asked if they were emotionally mature enough to make their career decision. They responded positively, with 92.8 percent (See table 10) in agreement that they were mature enough.

Study results revealed that 44.4 percent of the students had not made their career decision (See question No. 8).

Students were asked if they expected their career choice to meet their financial expectations and life goals. The students had a positive response of 87.9 percent (See table 5).

Students were asked if they believed that it was reasonable to expect a high school senior to make a career decision by the end of his or her senior year. The answer was no, as indicated by 48 percent of the respondents (See table 12).

Students were asked if they had spent time researching their career decision. A response of 17.7 percent (See table 8) fully agreed that they had spent an adequate amount of time doing so.

Of the respondents, 68.3 percent (See table 13) were in agreement that they had made the right career decision.

Students were divided in their response to question No. 20 concerning whether their high school experience had helped them with career planning. A total of 34.1 percent (See table No. 11) of the students disagreed with this statement and 26.6 percent were neutral. A slightly larger group of 38.3 percent agreed that their high school experience had helped with their career planning.

A total of 43.7 percent (See table 3) of the students indicated that they were leaving high school without having made a career decision. Of those students, 30.6 percent admitted that they would be making their decision soon.

Survey results revealed that 67.1 percent of the students considered themselves either an "A" or "B" student.

Students were asked to assess whether they were college material. A total of 79.7 percent (See table 15) agreed they were college material.

Parents were cited by 47.8 percent (See table 14) of the students as being helpful in reaching their career decision. With extended family responses added in, that grouping represented 59.3 percent of the total.

The total number of school-related staff members who were identified as being helpful totaled 15.1 percent. (See table 14) The teachers were cited as helpful in the career decision-making process by 11.1 percent of the students and school counselors were listed by 4.0 percent.

The results showed that 91.3 percent (See table 17) of the students who were planning to attend a post secondary school believe they have what it takes to complete their course of study and obtain a degree.

The response to question No. 36 pointed out that 90.2 percent of the students who were planning to attend a post secondary school expected to start that schooling by the fall semester of 2000.

Decision Delay Conclusion

Students admitted that they were delaying their career decision, as indicated in question No. 6 when 44.4 percent responded that they had not yet made a definite career decision. As a group (92.8 percent), they claimed they were mature enough to make a career decision. However, they contradicted themselves as 48 percent of the students admitted that it was unreasonable for them to make a career decision. Gray & Herr (1995) concluded that high school

seniors were at an appropriate age and should be able to make a tentative career decision before leaving high school.

Several factors might be interacting in this situation, the most important being parental expectations and their role in the decision-making process. After all, 70.2 percent of the students said that their parents had always wanted them to go to a 4-year college. Also a contributing factor is the little amount of time students spent researching their career decision. Only 17.7 percent of those surveyed were in full agreement that they had taken the time to look into a career, suggesting that they might not believe a career choice is an integral part of the career plan.

In addition, 79.7 percent of the students considered themselves college material and 91.3 percent believed they have what it takes to make it in school. It appears they might be assuming that they could attend college and succeed regardless of the occupational choice or at least attend college with the intention of taking general classes only. In these scenarios, students might not need a career choice; assuming that their eventual career will require a college degree or that the classes taken will be accepted in their eventual course of study.

In conclusion, statistical data showed that students at Mukwonago High School might not be taking responsibility or they believe that it is not necessary to make a career decision before making post secondary schooling plans.

Accurate and Realistic Career Decision Conclusion

The Mukwonago High School students claimed to be mature (92.8 percent are in agreement); however, they also claimed it was unreasonable to expect

high school seniors to make a career decision. Logic says that without a career choice, a career plan cannot easily be carried forward.

Among students responding to the survey, 91 percent were planning to attend a post secondary school. The Mukwonago School District reported a graduation rate of 92.2 percent for the class of 2000. Assuming that the high school dropouts would not attend a post secondary school, then potentially all the seniors, less 1.2 percent, planned to attend a post secondary school.

Based on state and national data it is doubtful that all college bound seniors will complete their course of study and obtain a degree. In fact, for the 4-year college bound students, the degree completion rate was only 47.6 percent nationally and 51.8 percent in Wisconsin. Students were not being realistic as 44.4 percent admitted they had not identified a career choice before leaving high school. Yet, these same students were planning to continue their education at a post secondary school. Assuming that Mukwonago High School students are not statistically different, roughly one-half of the 4-year college bound students will fail in their attempt to secure a degree in their chosen career. This situation was exactly what Gray & Herr (1995) warned students about in their book.

Root Cause

The students themselves admitted that it is unreasonable to expect them to make a career choice while in high school. Judging from that alone, it could be said that the students are not only being unrealistic, but are the cause of the problem. This however, is a symptom of the problem as the root cause remains buried deeper.

When asked whether they had spent an adequate amount of time researching their career choice, only 17.7 percent of them fully agreed that they had. It is possible that because students are not knowledgeable enough about their career choice, they might be the cause of problem and should research it some more. But this is just another symptom of the problem because doing so will not change the outcome. Only by identifying the root cause and then making changes that act upon that root cause can one accomplish meaningful and permanent change.

The students indicated they have what it takes to succeed, which leads one to believe that they also have the knowledge and ability. However, the students admitted not taking responsibility for their future direction by not researching their career or the 44.4 percent of whom that lacked any definite career decision. They consider themselves mature, so that if given the responsibility, they should be able to research their careers and take a more active role in their career search. They also should be more proactive in school and utilize all the resources available to them. Thus, given the responsibility, students should be able to affect change; however, they are not doing so. The students are not

taking responsibility for their career search and this gives the appearance that they are the cause of the problem. Again, this also is a symptom of the problem and not the root cause.

Root Cause Recommendation

Since the survey only deals with the student, some speculation is necessary to locate the root cause. Parents are responsible for child rearing, but today's society is placing more and more of that burden onto the school system. Even so, parents are responsible for providing the primary guidance for their children's progress and should teach responsibility to their children. Therefore, the root cause for the students not taking responsibility in their career-planning process might lay with the parents.

Recommendations

An often-quoted adage said "it takes a whole village to raise a child" (African proverb). The message derived from this study is just that: A high school student's career decision-making process needs interaction with and the help of virtually the entire community.

Parent Involvement

The school system cannot do the job by itself. The school-based influencers in the decision-making process comprise a mere 15 percent of the total. A student's friends have more influence than either teachers or guidance counselors. Parents have the most influence over their child's career direction, and their participation in the decision-making process is crucial. Mukwonago

High School should revisit all career-oriented functions and re-evaluate the role that everyone, especially parents, play.

Career Portfolio Outcomes

The school also must clarify for both students and their parents the intended use of the portfolio. Students appear frustrated over why they assemble samples of their work from grades 7-12. They do not fully understand how it might be used in helping them decide their career. An obvious place for parental involvement in the portfolio process is the parent-teacher conference. This forum provides for quality interaction between the teacher and parents, thus potentially creating a formidable coalition that could become a vehicle for honest communication about the student's true academic abilities, career interests and post-graduation opportunities.

Expand Work-Based Learning

Revisiting the village concept mentioned earlier, the vocational co-op and Youth Apprenticeship programs that Mukwonago High School offers are excellent experiences that bridge the gap with the business community. The only downside is the small numbers of students who participate since the majority of students are college bound.

To duplicate the valuable work experience component for the college bound students an expansion of the job shadow program might bridge the gap. Increased effectiveness of the job shadow would be realized if it were properly integrated into the curriculum and then linked with the portfolio project. The job-shadowing initiative ideally should be a multiple and sequential experience. The

district might also wish to explore limited internships as a means of involving the community in the career decision-making process.

Increased Role of Guidance

Lastly, guidance counselors must become more involved in the process by meeting with parents, business community and the students to discuss other initiatives that might provide direction for the student in his or her career decision-making process.

The research pointed out the many positive effects of community involvement on quality of life. Mukwonago High School should support special community service initiatives not only encourage student interaction with the rest of the community, but also foster a civic-mindedness that should continue throughout life.

Educational Options

The unfortunate reality made clear by this study is that high school seniors who lack a career choice or necessary academic skills are being led to believe they should attend a 4-year college after graduation. Many of these students should be directed toward a more realistic goal such as a technical college or other type of program that will usher them into a career sooner. The chances are good that they will attain job security, personal satisfaction, and financial success sooner than had they first failed at the 4-year college level, and then regrouped to explore other educational opportunities. In conclusion, a timely choice of both an accurate and realistic career and prompt execution of a complete career plan will increase the quality of life.

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Appendix

Survey of Mukwonago High School Seniors

Survey

I understand that by returning this questionnaire, I am at **least 18 years old** and am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in the study. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am aware that information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Note: questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to Peter A. Spangler, 618 Monroe St., Fort Atkinson, WI, 53538 and second to Dr. Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board For the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

1) Please circle the appropriate background information. (Circle one) Male Female

2) I am the _____ child in my family. (Circle one) Oldest Middle Youngest Only

Please circle the highest education level achieved by your parents:

3) Father <12 12 13 14 15 16 17+

4) Mother <12 12 13 14 15 16 17+

- 5) I consider myself:
- 1 An "A or B" student
 - 2 An "average student" mostly with "C" grades.
 - 3 I fit neither category.

6) **Yes** **No** I know exactly what I want to do in life.

7) What grade in school were you when you made your final career choice?

9th 10th 11th 12th Soon Long way to go

For the following statements, circle the answer that most closely describes your feelings and attitudes toward the idea presented.

A = Agree **D** = Disagree **MA** = Mildly Agree **MD** = Mildly Disagree **N** = Neutral

8) I believe anyone can be anything he/she wants to be, even the president of the United States.

9) My grades in school accurately reflect my ability level.

10) I feel confident that I will enjoy working in my chosen career.

11) My career choice will eventually help me meet my financial expectations and life goal(s).

12) Deciding my career was an easy thing to do because deep down I have always known what I wanted to be.

13) I have taken an active role in making my career decision.

14) I did not need anyone's help in deciding what career to pursue.

15) I have spent an adequate amount of time researching and deciding my career.

16) I needed to make very few compromises to arrive at a decision.

17) My career decision was not significantly influenced by anyone else and it is entirely my own decision.

18) I am emotionally mature enough to choose a career that will meet my life goals.

19) I not only have a chosen career, but also have a detailed plan of action that will eventually qualify me for a job.

20) High school has adequately prepared me to be able to choose a career and form an action plan to work toward that career.

21) It is reasonable to expect a high school senior to be able to make his/her career decision by the end of his/her senior year.

22) I feel confident that my career decision is right for me.

23) Who has been the most helpful in reaching your career decision? (check no more than 3 choices)

Father

Mother

Sibling

Relative

Teacher

Friend

School Counselor

Other _____

24) **Yes** **No** My parents have always really wanted me to go to a 4-year college.

25) My action plan will require at least ____ year(s) of post secondary schooling.

None **part-time** **1 or less** **2** **3** **4** **5+** **N = Neutral**

26) My parents believe that there is not a significant difference in the value of a 2-year and a 4-year college education.

27) I believe that there is not a significant difference in the value of a 2-year and a 4-year college education.

28) My parents think that 2-year technical colleges are not real colleges and do not want their children attending them.

29) My friends think that I am "college material."

30) My parents believe that I am "college material."

31) I believe that I am "college material."

32) Mainly it was my parents who decided my career for me.

33) I definitely believe that I must go to a 4-year college in order to be successful in life.

34) My parents approve of my career plans.

If you are not planning to attend any post secondary schools, stop here.

35) I plan on attending and obtaining my degree from a:

- A** Four-year college.
- B** Two-year community or technical college.
- C** One year or less technical/trade school.
- D** Other

36) **Yes** **No** I plan to start my schooling by the fall semester of 2000.

37) I do plan on taking some time off before or during my schooling.

38) Chances are great that I will have changed my career choice before I complete my degree.

39) I am not 100% sure of the exact job that I want; however, I feel that I am definitely going in the right direction.

40) I will continue going to school to obtain a degree regardless of any circumstances, even if I change careers and take longer than planned.

41) I believe that I have what it takes to complete a course of study and obtain a degree.

42) The **single** biggest reason why I am going on to school is:

Comments:

Thank You