

# Turning Points: Adolescents' and Young Adults' Reasoning About Career Choice and Future Employment

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## Introduction

A major turning point in adolescents' lives involves the career choice that they make while in high school. Frequently, it is viewed by family and community as a mere start to workplace readiness; however, this decision plays a major role in establishing youth in a career path that opens as well as closes opportunities.

Occupations play a large part in people's identity and everyday reality. The occupational roles that people perform determine the nature of their daily activity and social context. Furthermore, they spill over into self evaluation of success and perceptions of their quality of life.

Given the vast differences in the social and economic context of college-bound versus work-bound adolescents, questions can be posed to determine the factors that influence youth and young adults' selection of specific careers/occupations and how these choices relate to their future plans to obtain employment? Critical to exploring these questions is the role that context plays in the decision-making process. What are the contextual factors that facilitate or inhibit career choice and adaptive transition to the work world?

## Methodology

The goal of the study was to understand the nature and nuances that operate in young adults' lives during their career choice decision-making process, and the key factors that come into play in making an adaptive transition to the world of work. Qualitative methodology guided the research design and data analysis. The focus group process was selected as the preferred research tool because the study was seeking to uncover the perceptions that young adults have about their career choice and ultimate workplace transfer. The focus group process is a non-directive means by which participants provide information without being directed to answer specific questions (Krueger, 1994). A sample was chosen of high school seniors, college seniors, and young working adults who were employed in typical settings for non-college bound workers. These young adults were asked to provide potentially detailed narratives of their career choice decision-making process and transition related experiences.

The participants of the study's twelve focus groups were individuals from an eleven county rural area in Central Pennsylvania. Of these groups, seven were conducted with 98 high school seniors, three were with 50 graduating college seniors and two with 22 employed young adults. Input was collected from a total of 172 individuals who participated in the focus groups. The purposeful selection of the seven high school groups, which ranged from 10 to 17 participants, was based upon the size of the school's enrollments, type of school curriculum, and the medium income of the districts' families which Table 1 details. The selection of the three college groups that ranged from 14 to 22 participants was based upon their location in the area and type of majors offered. The two employed young adult groups that ranged from 10 to 12 participants were based upon the type employment and location within the area. The high school groups' members were 44 percent male and 55 percent female while the college groups' members were 42 percent male and 58

percent female. The working young adults groups' members who ranged in age from 25 to 35 years old were 59 percent male and 41 percent female. The groups' racial and ethnic composition was 98 percent Caucasian, 1 percent Black and 1 percent Hispanic. This racial and ethnic sample represents the cohort of adolescents and young adults that reside in the area.

The groups' interviews were conducted using open-ended structured protocols that lasted about an hour in length. The interviews were recorded, transcribed into a written format, and coded, and the emerging themes were identified and summarized. This report section relates the opinions and themes that emerged during the study. These emerging themes are reported in the following findings sections.

### FINDING 1

#### **YOUNG ADULTS, THROUGH THE INTERACTION WITH THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY, LEARN ABOUT AND EXPLORE CAREERS THAT ULTIMATELY LEAD TO CAREER CHOICE.**

Young adults are embedded in a context that forms a web of interdependence that shapes their interpretations of experiences and expectations (Bluestein & Noumair, 1996). The context of the school and community's culture played a critical role in shaping the youth's occupational choices. The increasingly strong cultural norm of going to college influenced many of the participating adolescents (Hektner, 1995). The economic and social circumstances of the broader community colored and influenced the youth's perception of appropriate career choices. Youth in communities of more affluence appeared to have more family and school support in career exploration. These youth identified

a wider range of career options and were more likely to be college bound as their first career step.

The study's young participants expressed a range of methods that they had employed to explore various career choices. The data suggests that the contextual fabric of significant others plays a key role in the exploration of various occupations and the youth's ultimate choice. Not surprisingly, the study found that families, parental and extended, were the most influential in shaping the choice process and in youths' learning about various career options (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pasorelli, 2001; Laverty, 2002). Family members provide valuable learning experiences through their own role models, as well as by supporting activities that assist the young person in exploring a career choice of interest (Reschke & Knierim, 1987). A parent's occupation provides first hand experience in assisting the young individual in refining their understanding of what a specific occupation involves. Reflective of the high school groups, the college groups reported learning about their career choice from family members, and choosing to follow in their parents footsteps. "I come from a family of teachers." "Both of my parents are teachers. When coming to college I tried something else, but found that I wanted to be a teacher and I'm very happy with that." When asked who influenced career choices one young man replied, "my Dad and some my uncle cause my Dad works on big Caterpillar transmissions. We would work together and, you know, I learned a lot from him, how to do anything and everything. This is why I'm a CAD major. I'm following in my Dad's footsteps." Family members also encouraged and supported these young adults' efforts to explore career options by supporting their efforts to experience or learn more about various career interests. Parents, more frequently mothers than fathers, had great impact by assisting the young person to sort out what were their strengths and how these related to occupations. Overall, parents are the key to assisting young adults to learn about and ultimately make a career choice.

Following parents and family, the individuals perceived aptitudes, abilities, skills, and personality match to an occupational choice was found to be the second most influential factor in learning about potential career options. The participating young persons talked about "being good a specific school subject," "having specific skills," or "recognizing that they liked doing a task" which influenced their career choice. Once these specific qualities were identified, they then began to explore and match these personal qualities to occupational options. The individual's self-efficacy and expectations for behavior outcome play a key role in career choice and can predict the range of occupations that will be considered (Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1996).

Actual working experience ranked third in assisting youth in selecting a future occupation. The experience of working part-time while in high school or college offers opportunities to explore career options (Braverman, Young, King, Paterson & Weisskirch, 2002; Powlette & Young, 1996). The importance of part-time work to youth's vocational choice was evident in the responses of the participants. An overwhelming 98% of the participants were currently working or in the past few months had worked at a part-time job. The youth strongly voiced that these experiences contributed greatly to their current career choice, by providing them the opportunity to learn about what they liked or disliked about the type of employment in which they were engaged. For some, this experience provided a strong motivator to pursue educational opportunities that would open the door to other types of employment. For others, the experiences reinforced their desire to enter an identified occupation. Part-time work was a critical mechanism of career exploration for the study's participants. It also benefited them by teaching critical personal workplace skills, such as money management, responsibility and time management.

Teachers also play a significant role in helping teens view their school-related course work and activities

as relevant to their futures and career choice. Teachers reinforce in young people an academic aptitude, tie a specific subject to future careers, and are strong role models for teaching or subject related career choices. For some young adults, teachers opened the door to considering occupations they had not considered before as career choices. Teachers can have long and lasting impact upon a young person’s occupational choice.

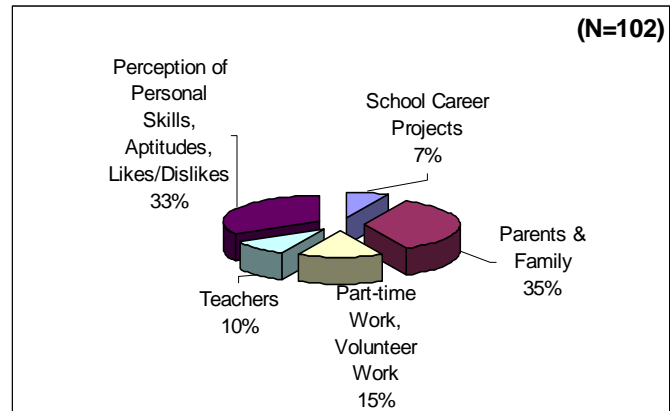
A few participating youth spoke of learning from a required career or career graduation project. Of these few individuals, they reported that the project did help them to determine what they would or would not like about a specific career. These projects appeared to provide more information about careers, but appeared not to be significantly influential in assisting young persons in finalizing a career choice.

The most significant career learning mechanism for the young college adults was provided through their involvement in internships. All of the groups reported this as a powerful tool that assisted them in refining and focusing their career choice. Internships not only gave the young adult a taste of the reality of an actual occupation, but also assisted them in recognizing the aspects of a job that were rewarding. “I started out as biology major and what changed my mind was I had an internship working in a lab and I really didn’t enjoy it. I decided the lab wasn’t for me, and I wanted to work with people, but I also do well in science so I combined the two and now I’m a psychology major and checked it out by doing a lot of volunteer work with kids. I decided I want to work in elementary schools with kids.”

Thirty-five percent of the study’s high school and college graduating young adults confirmed that parents and family members were the key in their learning about occupations. Closely following was 33% who reported that their own personal skills, aptitudes, and academic efficacy were significant in their learning about which careers would be

attainable for them. Part-time or volunteer work experience contributed to 15% of the group’s future occupational choices. Teachers and school projects played a less significant role with 10% learning from teachers and 7% from school career projects. [Refer to Chart 1].

**Chart 1**  
**Where Youth Learn About Careers**



The context that young adults grow up in has a great impact upon their self identity and their ultimate career choice. The significant components of family, school, and community all come into play in providing input into the adolescent’s perception of self, their behavior development, their educational efficacy, and vocational interests. Through interaction with elements in one’s context, one learns about various occupations and judges their capability to master those needed skills to be successful (Betz & Hackett, 1997; Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1996). Integration of self and social context offers the individual the opportunity to gain a sense of control over their career development (Chen, 1997).

**IMPLICATION:** The key to changing youth and young adults’ perceptions of careers will be mechanisms that assist parents, schools, and community stakeholders to provide learning experiences that communicate the positive opportunities local employment can offer.

## FINDING 2

### YOUNG ADULTS CAREER CHOICES ARE MOSTLY INFLUENCED BY SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUALS WHO PLAY KEY ROLES IN THEIR FAMILY OR ACADEMIC CONTEXTS.

Occupational exploration and choice is greatly influenced by the context in which the adolescent is embedded (Minor, Vermeirlen & Coy, 1998). As the individual grapples with the ultimate career path decision, central figures in the context have great influence. Those that were seen as having the most influence were parents, teachers and extended family members.

Parents influence not only their adolescent's educational activities, but also their occupational pursuits through their interaction concerning scholastic aspirations, academic attainments, and the appropriateness of occupational choices. (Olson, 1996; Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1996). Parents were described as providing influence predominately through advice and support, and thereby exerting influence over the youth's perception of specific careers appropriateness. Thus parents with strong academic efficacy for their child would discourage consideration of occupational pursuits relying heavily on manual labor (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 2001). Parents, as well as school and community, provide feedback about the appropriateness of a career choice involving a college education. When parents and community perceive careers requiring higher education as desirous, significant social and cultural support is provided to select those careers. The higher the family's socioeconomic status, the stronger parental support will be in promoting careers that involve college experience (Madsen, Brosnahan, Valdez, Donohue, McAllister & Braverman, 2002; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 2001).

Parents, while at the same time exerting influence, appear to provide a safety net that permits the young person to explore various work options. Through providing specific experiences and advice based upon their own work choices, their aptitudes, and the abilities of the adolescent, parents influence the career decision process. For individuals who transition directly from high school to work, parents, more frequently fathers, facilitate direct entry into a specific occupation (Blustein & Noumair, 1996). At the same time, parents often assist their children in balancing aspirations and reality. The influential role that parents play in the career decision making process is significant and critical to the youth's final career choice.

The college senior groups remember their family as the great influencer in their career choices. Family members, especially parents, were influential through providing role models of various occupational choices. Many of the young adults reported that their parents, or an extended family member, influenced their career choice by helping them experience the reality of a job, or teaching them skills used in the workplace.

Teachers were also viewed as being significantly influential in the career choice process (Madsen, Brosnahan, Valdez, Donohue, McAllister & Braverman, 2002). Teachers exerted influence through several avenues, such as reinforcing a young person's aptitude for a specific subject or skill, or by making specific subjects stimulating and rewarding to learn. Educational experiences that engaged and reinforced the young person's aptitude to achieve were viewed as key in many students future occupational choices.

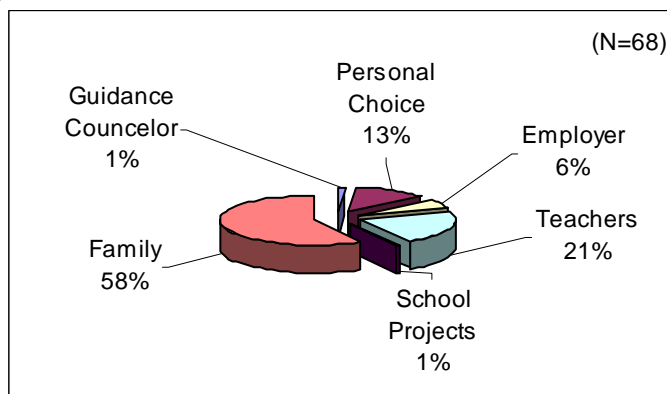
For the college groups, teachers were identified as the most significant influencers in their career choices. Teachers were viewed as being role models and guides that influenced these young adults in making a commitment to a career choice. Teachers assisted the applied college's seniors by

helping them identify a career that “uses both hands and head.” Through interaction with teachers, these young adults learned vocational skills, such as welding or construction, which matched their already existing skills and aptitudes. “I liked doing welding and was good at it. So I just took the next logical step and came to College.”

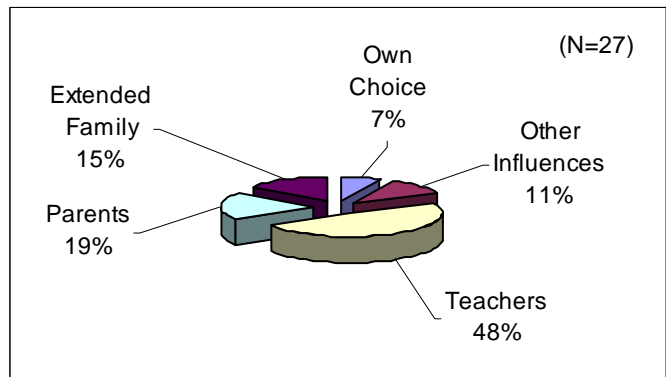
Other family members were also viewed as being influential in young person’s decision making process. These persons were seen as providing guidance, practical experience and encouragement. Frequently they were described as assisting in teaching skills critical to a work experience, or providing a role model of what the occupation involved.

The most frequently reported influencer for the participating high school groups was family members (58%), but this influencer decreased for the college groups to 34%. Following were teachers who the high school groups reported at 21% while the college groups viewed teachers’ influence as far more significant at 48%. The young adults own perceptions of a career match of their personal aptitudes to their beliefs of what an occupation involved was influential to 13% of the high school group participants, and 7% of the college group participants. [Refer to Chart 2]

**Chart 2**  
**Influence Over Career Choice**



**College Senior Group**



All of the most influential elements in the young person’s occupational choice process involved individuals in their context. It appears that those who currently play a key role in the youth’s life have the most influence in their making career decisions.

**IMPLICATION:** In changing youth and young adults’ perceptions about career opportunities, parents and other significant adults who have great influence upon their occupational choice decision process will need to engage.

**FINDING 3**

**YOUNG ADULTS RECOGNIZE THAT BARRIERS DO EXIST TO IMPLEMENTING THEIR FUTURE CAREER CHOICE AND SEEK WAYS TO OVERCOME THESE OBSTACLES.**

The choices that young individuals make in the transition from school to work have long-term implications. The reality of the challenges that barriers interject into the decision-making process colors these decisions. As a group, all of the youth voiced that having “the money,” or the financial means, to attend additional schooling or training was the number one barrier they perceived to achieving their occupational goals (Lent, Brown, Talleyrand,

McPartland, Davis, Chopra, Alexander, Suthakaran, & Chai, 2002). The participating high school youth talked about the necessity of scholarships and obtaining them as key to their higher educational goals. For some, financial concerns appeared to function as a constraint in their occupation choice decision-making process (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997). Vocational students were the most concerned about the financial means to attend additional vocational training or to obtain certification. Applied college seniors were concerned about repaying loans and fulfilling scholarship requirements that bound them to be employed in Pennsylvania for a specific time period. Overall, all of the youth and young adults reported that having the financial means to further one's education was the major barrier that they faced in achieving career goals.

Following financial concerns for the higher education bound youth, issues related to college acceptance and successful completion were paramount. All of the high school college-bound youth, vocational and baccalaureate were concerned about acceptance. The students in the highest median income high school who were 100% college bound, perceived "choosing the right college" as a major area of concern. After acceptance issues, commitment to college completion was another concern for many of the high school students. They voiced their own reservations about their ability to "stay focused," "remain committed," or "to stay motivated" through the educational process of college or additional technical training. The individuals voicing these concerns feared lacking the personal self-determination to remain focused upon tasks. They also recognized the challenge of balancing many demands to be successful in completing additional education.

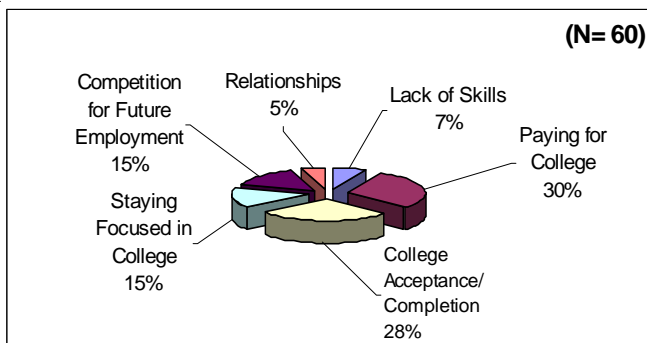
The students in the highest median income high school group who were 100% college bound, viewed the competition to obtain "the jobs of their choice" after college graduation as another barrier to their occupational choice success. Vocational

student groups also voiced concern about job competition for employment as a major barrier that only the quality of their work and certification could assist to remediate. These students were aware that their age and lack of employment history may be a barrier to them being employed in the positions that they would desire. However, the vocational high school students voiced clear career strategies for obtaining future employment that they perceived would lead to "Good paying jobs." In contrast, the other high school students were not concerned about future employment as an issue to their career choice success. The majority of graduating baccalaureate seniors had none or limited employment seeking strategies in place. Finding employment appeared to be something they thought would just happen upon their graduation, even though they voiced knowledge of the tight job market in many of the career fields that were prepared to enter. They were still thinking about the "ideal job situation" and aspiring to find it. "I think, like you have an idea of what the perfect job is in your head, exactly what you want to do in your mind." The one major difference between the applied college graduates and the academic college graduates is that the technical school graduates were more focused and active in seeking employment through a wider range of employment strategies. Several of the academic college seniors were seeking to avoid the current competitive job market by going on to graduate school. Their concerns were focused upon being accepted in a graduate school. These students had taken action to apply and were seeking acceptance in graduate programs. However, the majority of the soon to be academic college graduates were not or limitedly pursuing future employment.

For the study's participants the major barrier (30%) was the means to pay for college or higher educational training, followed by 28% reporting that college acceptance was a barrier to fulfilling their career goals. A total of 73% of the identified barriers were related to higher education completion. This perception is reinforced by the

young industry employed adults who reported that 38% of them upon high school graduation had planned to pursue jobs that required higher educational training. The majority never completed the academic program. However, a few were college graduates working in manufacturing. [Refer to Chart 3].

**Chart 3**  
**Barriers to Career Success**



The barriers that young adults face in the transition from school to work are realities that influence the outcome of individual’s career paths. Many personal, familial and community factors come into play as determinants in the achievement of one’s preferred work life choice.

**IMPLICATION:** Finding ways to assist youth and young adults in resolving the barriers to implementing their career goals would assist in increasing the number and quality of those seeking employment in the area.

## FINDING 4

### COLLEGE-BOUND AND WORK-BOUND YOUNG ADULTS ARE INFLUENCED BY VASTLY DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THEIR PURSUIT OF MARKEDLY DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL PATHS WHILE TRANSITIONING FROM SCHOOL TO WORK.

The movement from high school to the world of work represents a critical developmental transition during late adolescent (Vondracek, 1994; Super, Savicks & Super, 1996). The career choice that adolescents make is a decision that is influenced not only by their development but also by the context in which they live. A vast array of contextual factors interact with the individual’s characteristics to facilitate or inhibit the transition process.

Beginning early in high school, youth make decisions that have impact upon their future career choice. At this time, coarse choices put youth on paths that lead to college preparation or to work entry upon graduation. For the work-bound youth, learning technical and workplace skills are critical to their future employment. For the college bound group, achieving an academic background that makes them competitive in the college acceptance process is viewed as the critical next step in a career path. These groups of youth exist side by side in high school, but frequently are not viewed as being unique in the process to make an adaptive school-to-work transition (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). However, these different groups of youth face the transition to the workplace in different time frames, with different tasks to master, and with different expectations for the career opportunities available to them.

Youth who are college bound have career trajectories that are future oriented. The first step to achieve a career choice is tied to college

participation. The college bound youth most typically is affected by socioeconomic familial factors. These familial factors communicate the importance of academic achievement, and the development of social and self management skills required to succeed in college and careers that require college degrees (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Patorelli, 2001). The commitment to a career requiring a college education is a commitment to an investment of time and effort. Thus, for the college bound youth the focus is less on a specific career choice but more on achieving the first step which is college acceptance and participation. The ultimate job that the educational process is focused upon is viewed as being in the future, and in many cases, not grounded in the reality of actual working conditions. The high school college bound seniors were most concerned about college acceptance. "Once in college you can always change your career choice. Right now what is important is getting accepted." The study's graduating college seniors were more focused upon graduation than on entering the workplace upon graduation. Finding a job appeared to be viewed as a task unrelated to graduation and few had realistic plans to locate employment. "I have sent out some resumes, but I'll wait and see if any offers are made. Getting your resume out there is what you have to do. The offers will come."

The work-bound youth, high school and applied college, were more realistic about the actual jobs to which their training was leading. They had experience-based expectations that were developed through part-time work, internships and direct contact with individuals working in the occupation. The work-bound youth were actively looking for employment prior to graduation, whether it was high school or vocational college. These youth held realistic expectations of the context of specific work sites. They selected specific occupations based on the job itself and skills required to perform in it. Many of the study's youth talked about liking to "work with their hands and heads." Frequently, the occupations that they had chosen offered them an

opportunity to use skills that they had developed. The occupational choice had driven their skills development, which in turn reinforced their employability. The transition for the work-bound youth is more direct and dependent upon their employment.

This population of youth is the workforce that will remain in the local area frequently being assisted by family members to become employed. The contextual fabric of family and other significant individuals provide resources that influence the work-bound youth in their career choice and assist them by providing advice upon promising job leads and support while finding employment (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg & Roarke, 1997). As the youth move into the workforce, their role quickly shifts from adolescent to adult which binds them more quickly to adult expectations. The study's young adults groups talked about the necessity to become employed and remain employed as direct result of the need to provide financially for themselves or their family. These groups were most interested in becoming employed in a "good paying" job that was located close to their home. They are grounded in the area because of their ties to family and plan to remain in the area most likely employed in an occupation that provides the most financial return for their efforts.

The young adult working groups reported that the majority of them had began looking for work in the area directly out of high school. Some had attended a vocational high school. The majority reported that they had held a series of jobs prior to their employment at the manufacturing facility where they currently worked. Only one reported to have left the area and returned because of the rural culture and family. They viewed their current positions as being the "best" in the area due to the wage, benefits and working environment.

All of these young adults were working second shift due to the tenure of other employees. The majority had obtained employment at their current position

through family or friends. However, none of them wanted their children to follow in their foot steps. They were all encouraging their children to seek careers in other occupations that they perceived had more benefits to offer. Even with a few college graduates working with them, as a group they viewed college graduation as the step to a better job and life for their children. They saw that manufacturing as a shrinking occupation in the area, while service jobs appeared to be increasing.

For each of the groups of adolescents, family, education, and occupational choice frame their transition process. However, the different paths that each youth takes to workplace employment are markedly different. Recognizing the difference is critical to providing each with appropriate career development experiences.

**IMPLICATION:** Since the transition from school to work is markedly different for college-bound and work-bound youth, providing exposure to a wide range of occupational experience in the high school years is essential to assisting youth to make a realistic career choice. The more the experience involves actual interaction in the workplace, the more youth learn about the reality of what an occupation involves and how their personal skills and aptitudes would match a specific job.

## FINDING 5

### **THE CAREER CHOICE THAT YOUNG ADULTS MAKE IS EMBEDDED IN THEIR ACADEMIC EFFICACY, PERCEPTIONS OF THE “IDEAL JOB,” THEIR CAREER MATURITY, AND THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY. THEIR HIGH SCHOOL CAREER CHOICE IS A PIVOTAL DEVELOPMENTAL TASK THAT DEFINES THEIR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT AND LIFE TRAJECTORY.**

The path from school to work is greatly influenced by the occupational choice one makes in high school. The high school career choice that a young adult makes plays a pivotal role in their transition to adulthood (Felsman & Bluestein, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 2001). Often it is the choices that are made in high school that set the individual on a trajectory that leads to specific types of adulthood employment.

Occupational choice is not a mere matching process, rather it is a choice made in a context of many influencing factors that encompasses the individual's beliefs about themselves and their socio-contextual environment (Brown, 1999). For example, students enrolled in vocational training programs in high schools self select to pursue a specific vocation. If a vocational training program provides a rich and reinforcing experience, the young adult will most likely perceive being successful in that vocational choice. Building on this choice would lead to employment upon graduation or additional training.

Adolescents also use their academic success in specific subjects to determine their future career choice. For example, if one perceives positive and successful accomplishments in scientific and technology course work, the choice of career will most likely be in this occupational cluster. Cultural gender roles also exert influence in future career choice (Betz & Schifano, 2000; Betz & Hackett,

1997; Blustein, Pauling, DeMania & Faye, 1994). Socially oriented occupations, such as teaching or patient care, are more frequently chosen by females while business management or marketing are selected more by males (Nagle & Bohovich, 2000).

As an individual moves through the decision process, the perceptions that are held about what is an “ideal job” act as a filter for job appropriateness and influence the choice process (Rhea & Bohovich, 2000). For a large number of the study’s participating high school and college seniors, the “ideal job” concept focused strongly on having a job that they “would enjoy or find motivating.” “One you can wake up every morning and say I like going to work and this is what I want to do, not one where you have to wake up and say, another day at work, I don’t want to go.” These young adults were interested in employment that was interesting and stimulating. “It would have to be interesting. Make it not just a nine-to-five I have to go to work, but make it so you want to go to work.” The perception that work “should be stimulating and rewarding” would be applied to various occupations as a filtering consideration in the decision-making process. If a job would appear to not match this ideal then that occupation would most likely be devalued and no longer hold high preference in the choice process. However, for the work-bound youth and working young adults the major criteria for the “ideal job” was the level of salary, benefits and retirement provided by the employer. They were interested in a wage and benefit package that was competitive with national standards. Since in most area counties at least one employer is paying at this rate, these become the magnet employment opportunities. The work-bound and working young adults also secondarily judged the “ideal job” based upon security of employment. The “ideal job” paid a nationally competitive rate and was relative secure in its employment.

Adolescents encounter the developmental task of career decision-making which involves them in crystallizing, specifying and implementing an

occupational choice (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). Through exploration of employment opportunities, individuals eventually complete the task of specifying an occupational choice. Once this choice has been made, it then requires that the individual implements a personally defined “plan of action” to either gain additional education or training that leads to future employment or to identify and seek employment. As adolescents near the end of their high school training, the cultural expectation is for them to focus upon occupational entry and employment.

The study’s high school students in different school settings varied widely in their career decision-making maturity. Students of five of the seven high school groups verbalized specific career choices that they had made and were pursuing. In two of the schools, the majority of the students had made no career choices and was unsure about their future in terms of college participation or employment. Totally 37% of the participating high school adolescents were undecided about their future occupational choice. Since the majority of these individuals were in two high schools, it would appear that cultural community factors were influential in delaying the career choice process. The same contextual factors that support career decision making are influential in career indecision. The cultural and social milieu of family and community are the primary agents of the development of career choice maturity (Patton & Creed, 2001; Phillips & Blustein, 1994). The undecided youth appeared to find the career decision process to either be conflictual or irrelevant to their stage of development. “We have lots of time to decide, just because we haven’t made up our minds yet, doesn’t mean we never will. It ‘s hard to decide what you want to do.” The indecisive youth did not perceive that their lack of decision-making would in any way create a barrier to future career achievement success. The also perceived that it was not theirs or their families role to assist with this decision-making

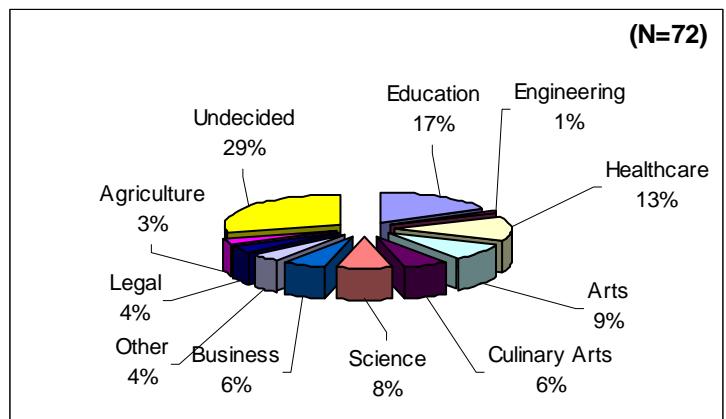
process but placed the responsibility in the school's realm. This would seem to indicate that these families were not highly involved or were taking a passive role in assisting their adolescent to make a decision and implement a plan of action to achieve a desired career choice. However, within these groups a few individuals had made a career choice and taken actions to pursue their goals.

In the high school groups most of the young adults had made career choices and were in the process of putting these plans into action. Participants of the highest medium income group expressed that they all were college bound with some already having received acceptance responses. Except for the two undecided high school groups and the technical vocational high school groups, almost all of the groups' participants were planning to attend some form of additional career educational schooling with the majority planning to attend college. Fewer of the students enrolled in the vocational high school programs were planning to attend any form of higher educational training. The majority of these students were planning to move directly into full time employment.

Another influential reinforcement to pursuing a vocational choice is the experiences that are provided by significant others in the young person's context, especially parents (Young, 1994; Kracke, 1997). Parents provide support networks that assist youth to explore their personal and future occupational interests (Madsen, Brosnahan, Valdez, Donohue, McAllister & Braverman, 2002). Parents also provide opportunities to learn specific skills that may be used in career options (Blustein, Phillips, John-Davis, Finkelberg & Roarke, 1997). By gaining real world experience, using the skills involved in a vocation, young adult are assisted in gauging individual skill level and aptitude for a future working environment. All of these experiences provide the young adult with a broader understanding of their own aptitudes and their application to a chosen occupational choice.

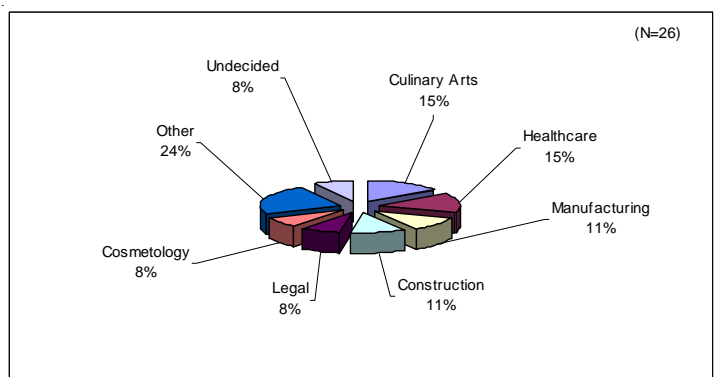
The careers that the high school students reported to be planning to pursue were predominately in the field of education and health care (education 17% and health care 13%). These two career options comprised 30% of the total participating population. [Refer to Chart 4].

**Chart 4**  
**Stated Career Choice**  
**First Semester Senior Year**



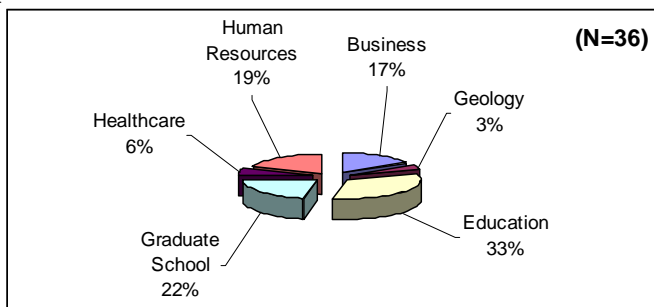
Of the high school vocational school participants, health care (15%) and culinary arts (15%) followed by manufacturing and construction (11%), were the occupations that the majority of the students were planning to enter, either directly upon graduation from high school or after attending additional training for certification. These three occupations comprised 52% of the vocational high school students' career choices. [Refer to Chart 5].

**Chart 5**  
**High School Vocational School Participants**

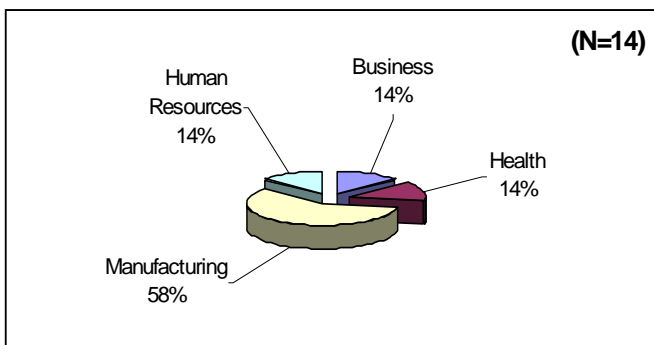


All of the higher education institutions' groups were made up of seniors preparing to graduate from colleges. Of this grouping, education (33%) was the most frequent career choice followed by human resource careers (19%) such as state public services or business human resource services. In these groups, 22% of the participants were planning to remain in the higher educational system to pursue graduate degrees rather than seek employment. The choice to further one's education was being influenced by the tight job market. It was the belief of these young adults that additional education would assist them in obtaining employment. [Refer to Chart 6].

**Chart 6**  
**Higher Learning Career Choices**



**Applied College Participants**



The graduating advanced applied educational institution participants were predominately planning to seek employment in manufacturing (58%). These students had all participated in some form of internship which had assisted them in refining their expectations of what future employment in industry

would be like and the competitiveness of today's job market. These individuals expressed grave concern about the tight labor market and their ability to obtain employment. They were foremost interested in "getting a job" and were thinking it would be difficult to obtain one. They were also willing to "go where the job would pay the most." The level of pay and the ability to use the skills that they had obtained were the most important criteria for employment acceptance.

The majority of the study's adolescents had made a career choice and was seeking ways to put in place a plan to achieve their goals. In two of the high schools, the majority of the students were undecided about their future. These youth appeared to be out of step in their development progress to define an occupational choice. It appeared that the context of family and community was not exerting expectations upon these youth to be engaging future adult roles in a proactive way. Since career choice is a developmental task that all young adults face, it would appear that these youth and their families could benefit from an intervention to assist them in preparing for the future transition to the world of work.

**IMPLICATION:** Assisting young adults in gaining information about various occupations, required occupational skill sets, future employment opportunities, and the transportability of workplace skills is critical to expanding the consideration of a wide range of employment choices.

## FINDING 6

### PERCEPTIONS OF AN OCCUPATION EITHER ENHANCES OR ELIMINATES IT FOR CONSIDERATION AS A POTENTIAL CAREER CHOICE.

The participating young adults both high school and college voiced a consistent perception of the four major industry clusters of the area which are Healthcare, Education, Manufacturing, and Lumber and Wood Products Production. All of the participants perceived that the Healthcare and Education sectors would offer good paying employment with future career advancement opportunities. The majority were aware that the Healthcare industry was currently experiencing a shortage which has created employment demand. The majority of the participants had negative perceptions of manufacturing, and lumbering and wood production sectors. The vocational student groupings were more positive in their perceptions of manufacturing. However, even within these groups there were negative perceptions of these occupations. This negative perception of the manufacturing and lumber products industries was verbalized by the young adults employed in the manufacturing sector. These adults valued their current employment but did not want their own children to pursue employment in manufacturing. They saw it as declining in its ability to offer secure and thriving employment opportunities.

Healthcare was viewed as a well paying, high demand occupational choice. The negatives voiced about health care as a career choice were that it was a “high pressure job” and some occupations required extensive higher educational training. Several of the participants had chosen to pursue a career in the health care industry. These range from dental assistant to doctor dependent upon the individual’s past and current school attainment and career choice experiences.

Education was seen as a potential career by several participants. Overall education was viewed as a positive career choice. The less positive comments offered by those interested in more “hands on” occupations, focused upon the desire to leave the school setting and to seek other forms of experiences.

The majority of the youth participants were aware that manufacturing was an employment opportunity available in the area. Many talked about the experiences that family and friends have had working in this sector. Overall manufacturing was perceived as offering monotonous, labor intensive, dead end working opportunities. The majority of youth, except for the vocational student groupings, talked about not wanting to be engaged in this type of work. “I see myself doing something bigger.” “We see those jobs as something people who can’t read and aren’t educated do.” The most frequently negative descriptor used was that it is “lots of hard work.” Manufacturing employment from their perspective focused upon working long hours engaged in monotonous, labor intensive work. They viewed today’s employment world as offering many more challenging, less strenuous, occupational opportunities.

In contrast, some of the vocational high school and college students were considering occupations that support manufacturing. As a group, they were aware of the various types of manufacturing operating in the area. They were interested in employment opportunities that offer competitive wages and advancement opportunities in relationship to other areas of the state and northeast states. The majority of the high school and college technical young adults were knowledgeable of various industries wage and benefits that were available within different parts of the state, northeast and nationally. These figures were used as a gauge to measure local industry employment opportunities.

The lumbering and wood products manufacturing industry was the least known and was the most severely stereotyped by all groups. They spoke about it as being manually labor intensive and extremely hard physical work. They did not perceive this industry as a desirable occupational choice. They stereotyped it as being an occupational choice of students with limited skills not one desirable for the generally population of students. In contrast, the vocational student groupings had individuals who were preparing to enter construction occupations that saw this segment of the industry as a positive career choice. These individuals spoke frequently about their desire to be able to use “their hands as well as their brains” in a job. Several of these young persons had parents or relatives who were employed in the wood construction industry. These adults appeared to have provided opportunities for them to learn more about the reality of the job and taught them skills that contributed to their interest.

The perception of the industries appears to be tied to different school contexts. In schools with a strong emphasis upon college preparation the students more negatively stereotyped the manufacturing and the lumber industries. They had little understanding of what the actual working conditions of the industries various jobs would entail, and were the least interested in learning more about these occupations. They had a more in-depth knowledge of the various occupations in the health care and education clusters and viewed these more positively. In the high college bound schools, the youth were aspiring to careers that required at least four years of college preparation and saw the clusters of manufacturing and lumber products as either not requiring college level skills or as undesirable in terms of the kind of work that was performed. The most positive perspective of the occupations that support manufacturing and lumber product production was evident in the technical high schools and applied college preparation programs.

**IMPLICATION:** For the youth, perceptions of an industry cluster frame the career choice process and influence their ultimate decision process. Changing industry perceptions may increase the desirability of these occupations as career choices.

## FINDING 7

### THE OUT MIGRATION OF YOUNG ADULTS FROM CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA APPEARS TO BE A FUNCTION OF ITS RURALNESS THAT OFFERS LIMITED EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY.

Central Pennsylvania is best described as a rural area which conjures up stereotypical images of trees, mountains and farms. Its lack of high population density and limited cultural and specialized employment opportunities creates for it issues that are typical of rural areas. For young adults who are making career choices the nature of the area possesses dilemmas that are tied to the area's rural social and economic context.

Youth growing up in a rural area face challenges in their ability to explore diverse occupational choices when many are not available in their communities. Adolescents aspire to what they know and can imagine. In rural areas exposure to a wide range of diverse occupations can be limited which tends to influence career choices (Haller & Virkler, 1993). As rural youth face the transition to adulthood and future employment, they move through a decision process that weighs alternatives that involve career, future education, and residential choice. Their decisions reflect consideration of their own abilities and opportunities available locally and within national labor markets. Rural adolescents, more frequently than urban and suburban youth, experience the conflictual dilemma of believing that both living close to family and going away from their rural area are important in their lives future success (Hektner, 1995).

The out migration of youth from rural areas is a phenomenon that appears to be driven by economic opportunity. Neither school size nor curricular offered appear to have a direct or indirect effect upon adolescents' tendencies to leave home. Rather the primary determinants appear to be structural aspects of the

school and community (such as isolation, intellectual levels and ruralness) coupled with the individual's traits and aspirations (Haller & Monk, 1992). For many the first step in the migration process is college or advance educational training. Generally, youth with the higher skills are the youth who are more likely to leave and relocate in urban or out of state locations (Garasky, 1999; Fox, 1993).

Reflective of this phenomenon, almost two thirds (64%) of the participating youth and young adults voiced that they were going to be leaving Central Pennsylvania, or not return after college graduation. Overall, these young individuals saw a limited job market in the area as the major reason for not remaining or returning. The majority of these individuals were planning to seek employment on the East Coast (85%). The job market of other east coast states especially the cities was viewed as providing more employment opportunities. These states appear to be high-attractor states that draw more young adults from out-of-state than low-attractor states of which Pennsylvania is identified as being (Perry, 2001). Another positive aspect of seeking employment on the East Coast was that it would permit maintaining close family connections. A smaller number were planning to seek employment in the south and west.

The youth who planned to stay were motivated to do so because of family and the culture of the rural area. Some talked about leaving to work for awhile then returning to establish families. The connection to family appeared to be a strong motivator for all groups but for those planning to leave better employment opportunities were the over riding factor.

Once again the nature of the school population played an influencing role. For the vocational student groupings the decision to go or stay was almost evenly split leaning more favorably towards going. Finding employment with a good wage and advancement was the major motivation for leaving the area. None of the high income college bound group expressed interest in coming back to Central Pennsylvania after graduation.

The majority of the other college bound participants were also not considering staying in the area. The availability of employment was the major reason for their decision to not return.

Individuals in all of the groups who were planning to leave were influenced by the perception that they could not find employment in the area, or if employment was available the wage was not comparable to that of other areas. The perception of the lack of employment opportunities appeared to be the major motivator to leaving or not returning to the area.

Almost all (88%) of the college graduates were planning to leave the area and Pennsylvania. These individuals reported several factors that were motivating this decision. All of them perceived that area had only limited employment opportunities. For the technical college graduates, low pay was a major motivator for leaving. "In this area the salary that is offered is not what a four year bachelor degree deserves. Nearly everybody wants to pay you peanuts and work you twelve-hour days so I'm, show me where the money is and I will go there." For many of the academic college seniors leaving Pennsylvania was a necessity to gaining employment due to the over supply of accredited graduates in their field. "I don't think that Central Pennsylvania has the kind of jobs or income that I'm looking for in social work. The agencies in this area just don't offer the employment opportunities that a larger area does." "I think for education majors especially in Central Pennsylvania it's not practical to stay in the area. It's very hard to find a job and you might commit yourself to being a permanent sub, so I'm moving anywhere I get a job." Jobs in the cities and other states on the East Coast were viewed as more attainable and in some situations paid a higher starting salary. Overall the college graduates were leaving due to their perception that gainful employment was not available in Central Pennsylvania, or, if available, it did not pay a wage that they perceived their skills warranted.

Of those few (12%) who were planning to stay, all were graduating from the technical college. None of

the academic college graduates reported planning to stay in Central Pennsylvania. The reasons the technical college graduates cited for staying were primarily to remain close to family and lower costs of living in the area in contrast to the more metropolitan areas.

The majority of the young working adult groups who ranged in age from 25 to 35 reported that they were planning to stay in the area as long as they remained employed at the current manufacturing facility where they worked. They viewed this as being the "best employer" in the area because of wages paid, benefits and working environment. The major reason that would motivate them to leave to go to another state where they could obtain comparable employment was the stress of lay-off. They reported being "rooted" in the area by "family, owing a home and having to pay bills." These individuals were torn between being able to provide for their families and uprooting them to move away from family and friends. As a group, they were concerned about the lack of "good" manufacturing jobs available in the area. Their perception of the shrinking manufacturing base was viewed as a threat to themselves and to their children's future as stable employment.

Even though the decision to leave or stay in Central Pennsylvania is complex, the disturbing fact is that those youth with more educational training and more likely higher skills are more likely to leave this rural area. Reflective of other rural areas, in economies where the perception is that the area's economy and employment opportunities are shrinking there is a higher out migration rate of skilled youth (Garasky, 1999). Critical to reversing this trend is to recognize the role that the perception of an increasing lack of employment opportunities in an area has upon the individual's ultimate decision. Decreasing out migration of young adults by changing beliefs about the vitality of the area's communities and its economy would appear to be more viable than by focusing upon raising the area's educational level or expanding its infrastructure (Galston & Baehler, 1995).

**IMPLICATION:** Decreasing the out migration of an areas young adults will be directly tied to changing their beliefs about the area and the employment opportunities that they perceive available to them.

## Discussion and Implications

The transition from high school to the world of work is a critical developmental transition for young adults. The career choice made at this turning point in life shapes the individual's future. The themes that have been identified in this study provide a vivid perspective of the how rural adolescents and young adults view their futures and career choice alternatives.

The findings provide support for the pivotal causal role that context through family and community play in influencing adolescent and young adults' career trajectories. Family and community influences have a direct and indirect effect upon adolescents perceived career choices. Direct influences were evident in the key roles that family played in assisting adolescents in learning about career options, in the teaching technical skills that lead to career choices, and in providing connections for employment. Indirect influence was evident in parental expectations and aspirations that are mediated through academic expectations, appropriateness of career options and exposure to employment opportunities. As young adults move away from direct parental daily supervision, the influence of others such as college teachers or employers has a more direct and indirect influence upon their continued vocational involvement. Direct effect is exerted through the feedback that the young adult receives from significant individuals in their career preparation or working environment. Indirect effect is exerted through the individual's perception of the match of their capabilities to a vocational choice's competencies. If one views themselves successful in mastering a vocation's technical competencies they will continue in a career path, but if one is not successful they will explore other vocations with different competencies.

The context of family and community are key factors that have great impact upon the ultimate career choice that adolescents make. Their role is both direct and indirect in shaping the young adults perceptions of what are appropriate and acceptable vocational choices. Families act on their beliefs about what will be the outcomes of various career choice courses of action. For their children they hold beliefs that are based upon their own experiences, their perceptions of their child's academic and aptitude efficacy, and their certainty that a course of action can be implemented. These factors motivate families to act and react to specific vocational options whether the choice requires further educational training or direct workforce entry. Family and community create a cultural and socioeconomic milieu that has great influence upon adolescents' career choices and ultimate employment.

The study's finding of groups of senior high school adolescents who were exhibiting indecisiveness in their career decision-making process appears to suggest that the foreclosure of career choice may rest heavily upon the context in which individuals develop. Families that are not highly involved or take a passive role in assisting their adolescent to make a career decision and implement a plan of action to achieve a desired career goal, provide a context of uncertainty and the appearance of nonsupport. When this parental stance is typical of the majority of families within a community, it creates a cultural acceptance of perceived appropriate parental expectations and behaviors. The embeddedness of these attitudes result in creating a context that is accepted by the community, but is nonproductive for their youth's development and future vocational aspirations.

Vocational aspirations are a function of an individual's assessments of compatibility with an occupation and the reality of their ability to successfully master a vocational skill. As adolescents move closer to the time of implementation of a career choice, the more serious the commitment becomes and the more realistic their aspirations become (Gottfredson, 1996).

At this stage, the reality of choice becomes tempered by their perception of accessible employment opportunities, and by the barriers to be overcome to succeed. The young adults in the study were at the stage in their career choice process where reality was beginning to play a key role in their future planning and eventual employment opportunities. The high school adolescents had to choose their future vocation and implement plans to either attend college or find employment. The graduating college seniors were facing the critical step of finding employment in a chosen vocation, while the working young adults were considering the likelihood of their current employment lasting a working life time. Each of these groups was facing major decision milestones in their career development process. Making a career decision is only part of the operation of a decisional process. Implementing a decision and sticking to it, especially in the face of difficulty, is the challenge to obtaining vocational success. All of the groups identified barriers that they perceived needed to be overcome to achieve vocational success. The reality of overcoming barriers was the most evident in the high school groups, especially the vocational school students, and in the working young adult groups. The college graduating groups were less focused upon the challenges that they faced in finding employment in their chosen vocation, and were less willing to compromise in adjusting their aspirations to accommodate to external reality. These findings would suggest that learning to identify and address obstacles in one's career development process is critical to purposeful adaptation and employment satisfaction (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg & Roarke, 1997).

The transition from school to work is one that most individuals make either after high school or college preparation. How successful this transition is perceived to be by the individual,

influences their emerging picture of themselves and their satisfaction with employment. Adolescents in high school self select to college-bound or work-bound trajectories. These paths lead to different vocational outcomes. Recognizing and valuing that each career path engages different contextual and self efficacy perceptions, creates the environment to provide appropriate information and support for adaptive transitions. The findings of the study illustrated that individuals who are work-bound are focused and realistic about their career choices. Providing support for these young adults to make an adaptive transition to work can be highly productive in developing a skilled, well trained workforce that will remain in the area to support the local economy and community. The young adults who were college bound most typically had not made a firm commitment to specific occupation. The college experience postpones the reality of the commitment to a specific job's expectations, ultimately postponing this adaptation until after college graduation. It is critical for high school's to recognize that students do have different career paths that need different types of career development support.

The study's findings provide evidence that the young adults in the study selected careers that reflected the major industry clusters in the area. The two major employment sectors of education and health care employ a significant number of the area's workers. These industry clusters were viewed as being positive employment opportunities because of the nature of the work and potential income. The prevalence of vocational opportunities and the positive perception that youth hold of these careers would indicate that they will continue to be career choices of large numbers of young adults. However, the other two major industry clusters in the area, manufacturing and wood product production were not viewed as positive employment opportunities and were overall the career choice of less than four percent of graduating high school and college seniors. The one sub-grouping that viewed manufacturing as a positive career choice was the vocational high school students and the applied college

graduates. Overall, the study's youth did not perceive employment in the manufacturing sector as desirous due to the nature of the work and income. Key to increasing youth's interest in choosing manufacturing as a career, will be changing their perception of the nature of work involved in manufacturing and the pay scale.

Supportive of area perceptions, the findings of the present study illustrated that the majority of the youth and young adults are planning to leave Central Pennsylvania upon graduation. This is a conflicted decision driven by the perception that the area does not offer employment at a pay scale competitive with other areas of the state or the East Coast states. The groups that were planning to seek employment in the area were the high school work-bound youth and the working young adults who already were employed in the area and most typically obtained area jobs directly out of high school. Many of these individuals were employed or seeking employment in manufacturing jobs. The higher the young adult's skill level the more likely they were planning to leave Central Pennsylvania to relocate in urban areas or out of state. The strongly verbalized belief of these groups is that the area offers limited employment opportunities at a noncompetitive pay scale. Family and the ties to the area were the major elements that the young adults would miss upon relocation. These ties appeared to be the driving force to remain within commuting distance when moving out of the area.

## Conclusions

The presented findings further the understanding of the role that contextual factors play in shaping adolescent and young adults' career choices. The key role that family plays in the process was evident. Youth learn about career choices and are influenced most frequently by family members, mainly parents. The youth's perceived occupational self efficacy gives direction to their pursuits of a preferred choice of work life. The youth's perceptions of their ability to fulfill both the educational and occupational roles of a vocation reinforce a choice if the expectation is positive. For high school adolescents, parent's expectations and aspirations shape the youth's perceptions of acceptable career choices, while college students appear to be more influenced by teacher's perceptions. The mastery of barriers is a critical milestone to achieving career goals that assists in grounding a career choice in reality. Whether youth are college-bound or work-bound their perceptions of various occupations guide their career selection and influence their career goals. The developmental task of career choice is pivotal in assisting youth to transition into adult roles that are productive and satisfying. Critical to the process, all of the key players within the context need to be active participants.

For all young adults, career choices that are made shape their lives and determine their futures. The career decision-making process that begins in youth impacts the course of lifestyle trajectories throughout the lifespan.

**Table 1: High School Participants Schools' Descriptions**

| <b>Code</b> | <b>School Descriptor</b>   | <b>Participants</b>                        |
|-------------|--|--|
| A           | School A is in a district that has a median income of \$46,335. Attendance rate is 94.4% and 77.3% of the students are college bound. 5% of the students enrolled are low income.<br><br>Enrollment: 613                   | 100% College Bound                         |
| B           | School B is in a district that has a median income of \$37,839. Attendance rate is 94.6% and 87.2% of the students are college bound. 14% of the students enrolled are low income.<br><br>Enrollment: 606                  | 50% College Bound<br>50% Non College Bound |
| C           | School C is in a district with a median income of \$31,452. The school has an attendance rate of 89.6% and 67.8% of the students are college bound. 25.4% of the students enrolled are low income.<br><br>Enrollment: 2002 | 50% College Bound<br>50% Non College Bound |
| D           | School D's is in a district that has a median income of \$32,902. Attendance rate is 92.5% and 55.8% of the students are college bound. 28.7% of the students enrollment are low income.<br><br>Enrollment: 359            | 50% College Bound<br>50% Non College Bound |
| E           | School E is a Vocational Technical school. The median income of its feeder districts is \$42,924. Attendance rate is 94% and 17.4% of the students enrollment is low income.<br><br>Enrollment:269                         | Representation.<br>of all/most majors      |
| F           | School F is a Vocational Technical School. The median income of its feeder districts is \$39,551. Attendance rate is 89.4% and 38.9% of the students enrolled are low income.<br><br>Enrollment:380                        | Representation.<br>of all/most majors      |
| G           | School G is in a district with a median income of \$30,936. The school has a 92.6% attendance rate and 38.1% of the students are college bound. 29.3% of the student's enrolled are low income.<br><br>Enrollment: 927     | 50% College Bound<br>50% Non College Bound |

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2000-2001.  
Standard and Poor's School Evaluation Services, 2000.

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