High School Students' Career Choices and Career Confidence: Motivations, Influences, and Challenges

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Introduction

Choosing a career is among the most significant decisions that happen in a person's life. These choices can impact educational attainment, future opportunities, work success, and personal well-being. Well-considered career choices that align with an individual's interests, skills, and/or values are associated with higher job performance, higher earnings, and greater job satisfaction (Hoff et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2009). Career choices that are a good fit also contribute to greater mental health and well-being (Redekopp & Huston, 2018). In contrast, poorly considered career decisions can lead to consequences such as greater work stress, job dissatisfaction, and lower job commitment, which may negatively affect an individual's work and personal life (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Patel et al., 2024). Thus, it is critical for individuals to make informed and thoughtful career choices that are more likely to lead to rewarding and successful careers.

As high school students consider their future career choices, they may face the challenge of navigating hundreds of career options and the potential influences of numerous factors when making these choices. Students may rely on tangible occupational factors such as work tasks, job outlook, and salary to help narrow down their options. They may also consider the education or training needed to enter an occupation, which can either expand or limit their opportunities in different career fields. Students may focus on factors such as interests and passions, which can motivate them to persist through their education and contribute to early career success and longer-term employment (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Stoll et al., 2017; Volodina et al., 2015). Skills and abilities are also critical as they affect whether individuals will perform well on the job (Bandura et al., 2001). In addition, students may prioritize their values and preferences, which can guide them toward careers that align with their belief system and desired lifestyle. Further, family members and others in the lives of students such as teachers and friends can also shape career choices through their expectations, support, and positive or negative perspectives on careers (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). Direct work-relevant experiences have also been shown to affect career choices (Lent et al., 2002). Clearly, a wide range of factors can influence career choices and understanding these can help students make more informed decisions about which careers will fit them best.

Career decision-making self-efficacy (confidence in the ability to complete tasks involved in making career decisions) is also a particularly salient factor as it relates to students' career choices. On one hand, career decision self-efficacy is positively related to career choice decidedness (Sheu, 2023). On the other hand, there is support for career decidedness

predicting career self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2019). This suggests that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between career choice decidedness and career decision-making self-efficacy. Willhardt et al. (2025) describes this as a "feedback loop from career decidedness to participants' later career-related self-efficacy in return. Career decidedness, after all, will foster actions and experiences that will then serve as learning experiences for future self-efficacy" (p. 3). In other words, confidence in making career decisions leads to more decisive career choices, and having a decided career path enhances confidence in one's ability to succeed in that career.
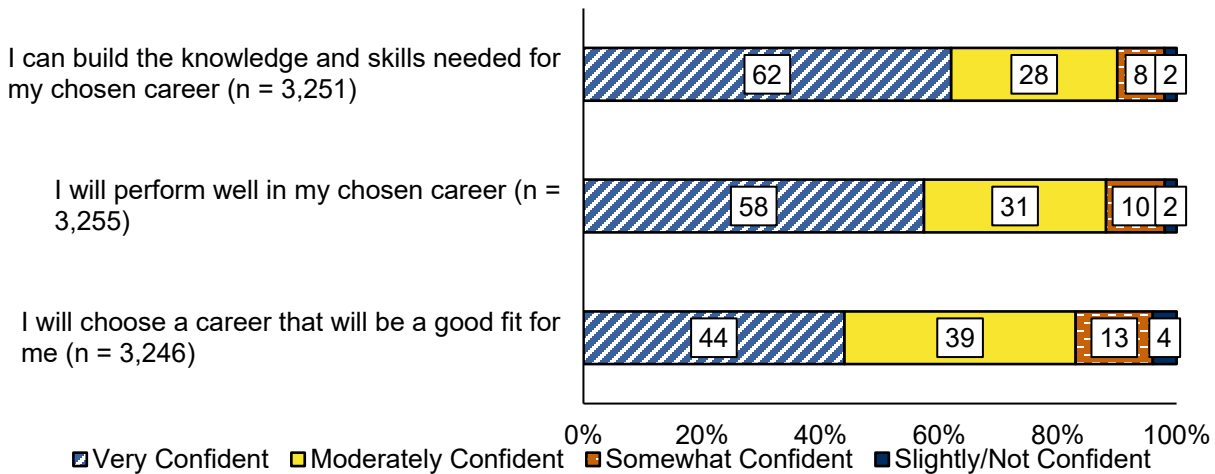
Given the importance of career choices for future outcomes, it is critical to learn about high school students' perspectives on their choices. What reasons do they think are important to consider when choosing careers? How influential are people and experiences when making their career decisions? What factors do they agree would be involved in making good fit career choices? How are their career choices related to their level of confidence in making good fit choices and their future success? What challenges do they have when choosing careers? The answers to these questions can help us better understand students' thoughts on career choices and provide insights into how to better prepare them for making these decisions.

To understand students' perspectives on their career choices, we surveyed a random sample of high school students in Grades 11 and 12 who registered for the July 2024 ACT® National test (see the Technical Appendix for more details on the sample). In this online survey, we asked students to share their thoughts on career choices, including what reasons are important to consider, whether people and experiences are influential, what makes a good fit career choice, and their confidence in their choices. We also asked about their experience with career choice challenges. In this brief, we share what we learned from 4,367 high school students on these topics.

Decided Career Choices Related to Greater Career Confidence

High school students had many thoughts about their future careers. Among the surveyed high school students, a little over half (53%) indicated that they had decided the occupation they wanted to pursue, 45% had some options in mind but had not decided which to pursue, and only 2% had not thought about which occupation to pursue. Furthermore, most students felt sure of and satisfied with their choices. Of those who had already decided which occupation to pursue, 46% were very sure of their choices, with another 44% moderately sure. Also, 57% of them felt very satisfied with their choices and an additional 32% were moderately satisfied.
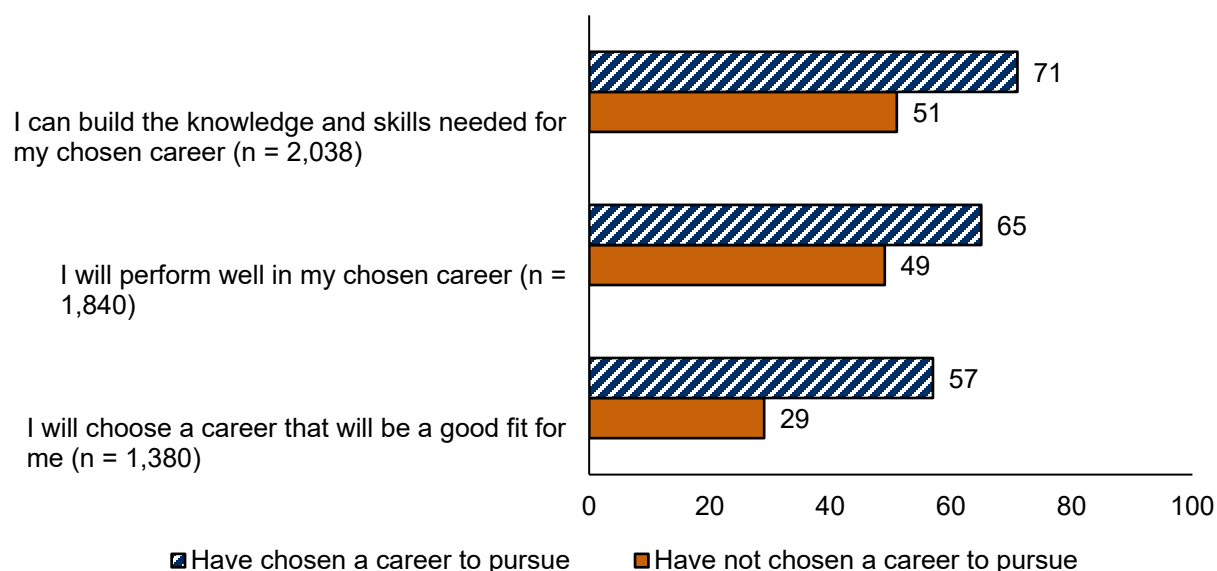
We also investigated students' career confidence in three aspects—choosing a career that will be a good fit, building knowledge and skills needed for their chosen career, and performing well in their chosen career. Overall, a large majority of surveyed students reported being very or moderately confident that their career choices would be a good fit for them (83%; Figure 1). An even higher percentage of students were similarly confident that they could build the knowledge and skills needed for their chosen careers (90%) and that they would perform well in these selected careers (89%).

Figure 1. Percentages of Students Rating Level of Confidence in Career-Related Tasks

Note. Percentages might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting. Slightly Confident (*n* = 94) and Not Confident (*n* = 37) were combined due to smaller *n* counts.

We further explored whether students' career confidence was related to whether they had chosen a career to pursue.[1] Results showed that students who had decided on a career were significantly more confident that there would be positive consequences related to these choices than students who had not decided on the careers they would pursue (Figure 2). Nearly twice as many students who had made a career choice were very confident that they would choose a career that would be a good fit for them compared to students who had not yet chosen their career (57% and 29%, respectively). Students with a chosen career are likely expressing confidence in that choice as a good fit career but may be expressing confidence in a future good fit career choice. While approximately three-quarters of the students (71%) with a chosen career were also very confident they could build the knowledge and skills needed for their career, only half of the undecided career choice students (51%) had this level of confidence about building their career-related knowledge and skills. Further, two-thirds of those (65%) with chosen careers were very confident that they would perform well in their chosen careers compared to half of students (49%) without a chosen career.

Figure 2. Percentages of Students Reporting They are Very Confident in Career-Related Tasks by Choice Status

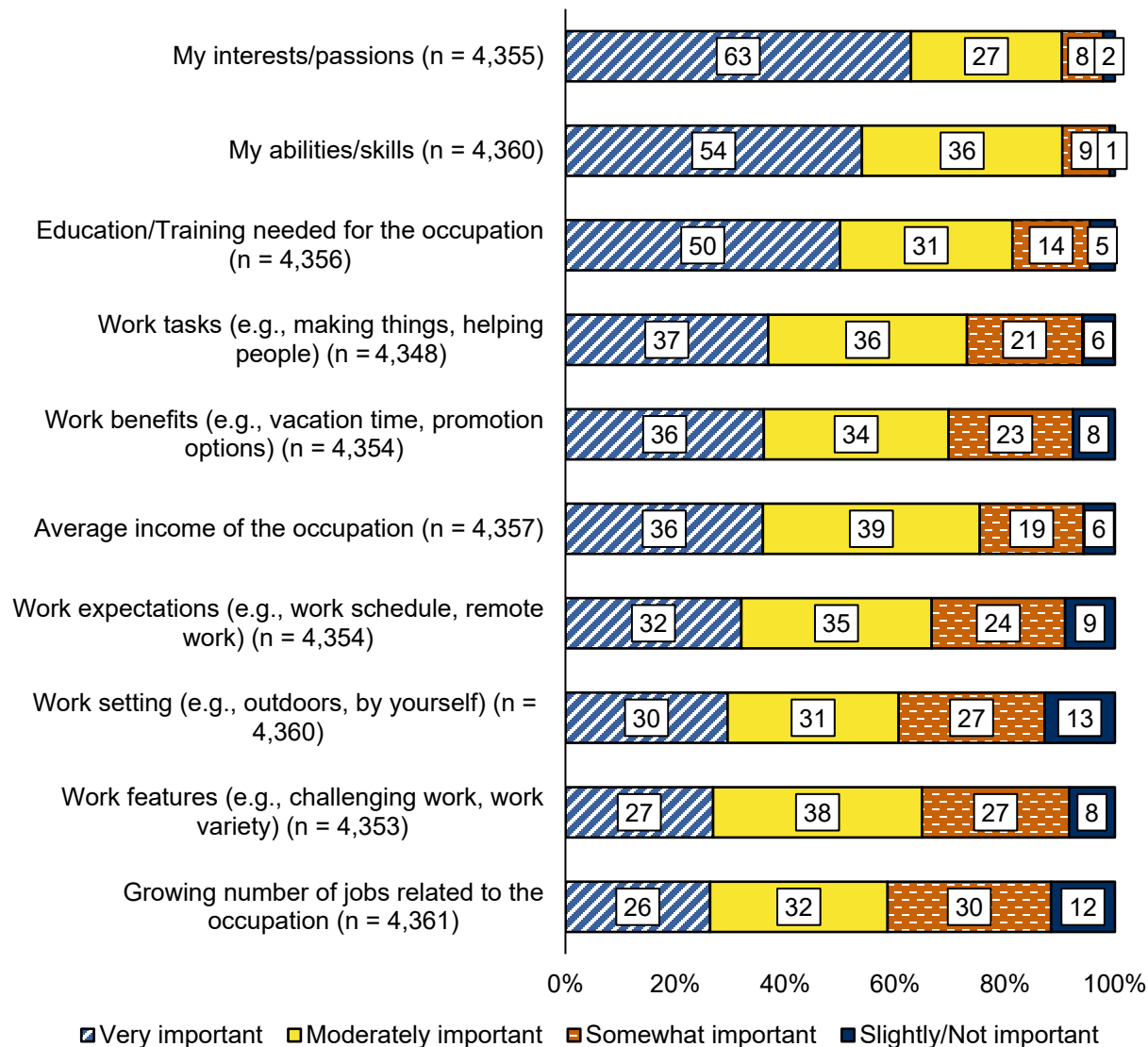Have chosen a career to pursue ▨   Have not chosen a career to pursue ▨

Note. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

To explore factors that were potentially associated with whether a student decided on a career and associated with students' levels of career confidence, we conducted logistic regression analyses[2] and multiple linear regression analyses[3] (see the Technical Appendix for regression statistics). These models helped us further understand the relationship between having chosen a career to pursue and career confidence. After holding demographic variables (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, income, parent education level) and other independent variables constant, having chosen a career to pursue consistently still had a significant positive relationship with career confidence (Tables A3–A5). Students with a career choice were significantly more confident that their career choices would be a good fit, that they would build the knowledge and skills needed for those careers, and that they would perform well in their careers (Tables A3–A5). These results show that having a career choice boosts students' confidence in their career fit and their belief in their ability to succeed in their chosen careers. Additionally, the results of the regression models revealed several important factors that were related to deciding on a career and/or career confidence, which we will talk about one by one as follows.

Students' Career Choices Motivated by Personally Relevant and Occupation-Specific Reasons

The majority of high school students rated multiple reasons as very or moderately important to consider when choosing their careers (ranging from 58% to 90%; Figure 3). On average, students rated 4 out of 10 reasons as very important when choosing careers.
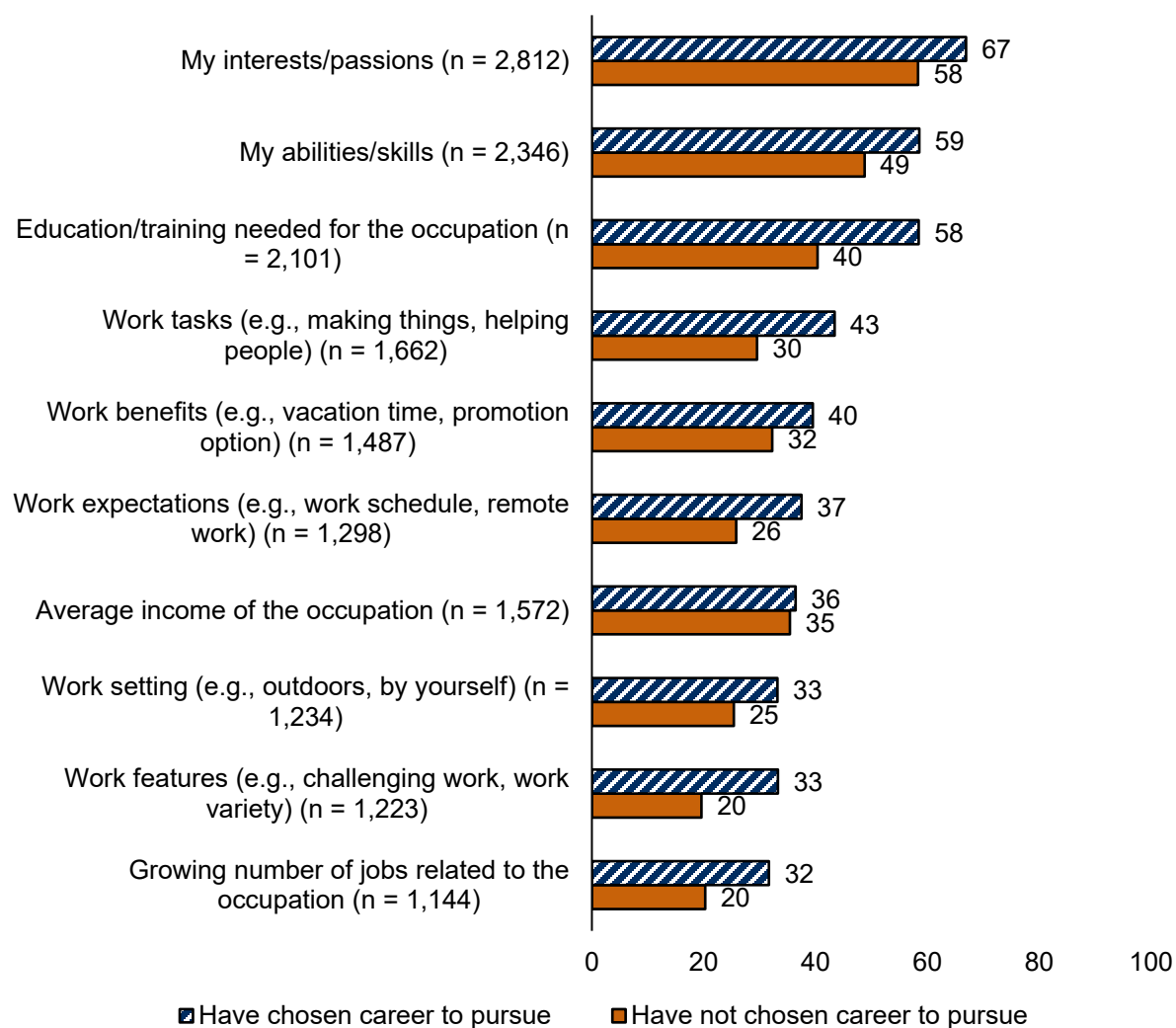
Figure 3. Percentages of Students Rating Importance of Reasons for Choosing Careers

My interests/passions (n = 4,355): Very important 63, Moderately important 27, Somewhat important 8, Slightly/Not important 2

My abilities/skills (n = 4,360): 54, 36, 9, 1

Education/Training needed for the occupation (n = 4,356): 50, 31, 14, 5

Work tasks (e.g., making things, helping people) (n = 4,348): 37, 36, 21, 6

Work benefits (e.g., vacation time, promotion options) (n = 4,354): 36, 34, 23, 8

Average income of the occupation (n = 4,357): 36, 39, 19, 6

Work expectations (e.g., work schedule, remote work) (n = 4,354): 32, 35, 24, 9

Work setting (e.g., outdoors, by yourself) (n = 4,360): 30, 31, 27, 13

Work features (e.g., challenging work, work variety) (n = 4,353): 27, 38, 27, 8

Growing number of jobs related to the occupation (n = 4,361): 26, 32, 30, 12

Legend: ▨ Very important ▨ Moderately important ▨ Somewhat important ▨ Slightly/Not important

Note. Percentages might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Students were most likely to say that their interests and passions were "very important" for choosing an occupation (63%), followed by their skills and abilities (54%). Half of the students surveyed thought it very important to consider the education and training needed for an occupation when deciding whether to pursue that occupation. Approximately one-third of the students (ranging from 30% to 37%) considered occupation-specific reasons very important, and another third considered these reasons moderately important (ranging from 31% to 39%), including work tasks, work benefits, average income, work expectations, and work setting. Job growth was cited as very important to consider by one-quarter of the students (26%) and moderately important by another third of them (32%).

Across the different reasons students reported considering when choosing a career, students who had a chosen career were more likely to rate these reasons as very important than students who had not yet chosen a career (Figure 4). The largest difference (at 18%) was for the education and training needed for an occupation. There was also a 13% difference between those who had and those had not chosen a career regarding work tasks and work features, followed by a 12% difference when it came to job growth being a very important career choice consideration. For the personally relevant reasons, there was a difference of 10% for abilities and skills and 9% for interests and passions.

Figure 4. Percentages of Students Rating Most Important Career Choice Reasons by Choice Status

Have chosen career to pursue   **Have not chosen career to pursue**
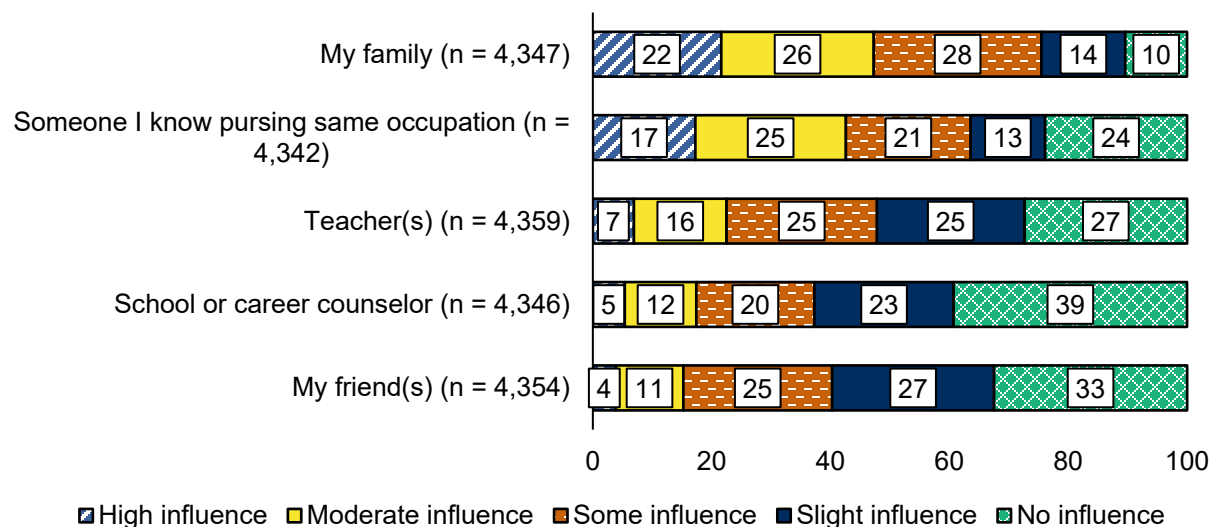
Note. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

The total number of reasons considered very important for choosing an occupation was a significant predictor of whether or not a student had already made a career choice.[2] The number of reasons students considered very important for making an occupation choice was positively related to having chosen a career they wanted to pursue. For every extra reason considered very important, the odds of having made a career choice increased 15%, holding constant all other variables. Additionally, the total number of reasons considered very important was also positively associated with students' career confidence.[3] After controlling for other variables in the models, the number of very important reasons was still statistically significant in predicting students' confidence in their career choices being a good fit, confidence in their ability to build the knowledge and skills needed for their careers, and confidence in performing well in those careers. The more reasons students considered very important, the higher their career confidence.

Students' Career Choices were Influenced by Both People and Experiences

Students were asked how much influence different people had or would have on them when choosing an occupation. Nearly half of students (48%) reported that family members had a high or moderate influence on their career choices (Figure 5). This was followed by 42% of students indicating that someone pursuing the same occupation had or would have highly or moderately influenced their own choices. Fewer students cited teachers (23%) and school or career counselors (17%) as having high or moderate influence, although 25% and 20% of students, respectively, thought these two groups of people had some influence on their career choices. Similarly, a quarter of students thought friends had some influence on their choices, with 15% reporting friends having high or moderate influence (15%).

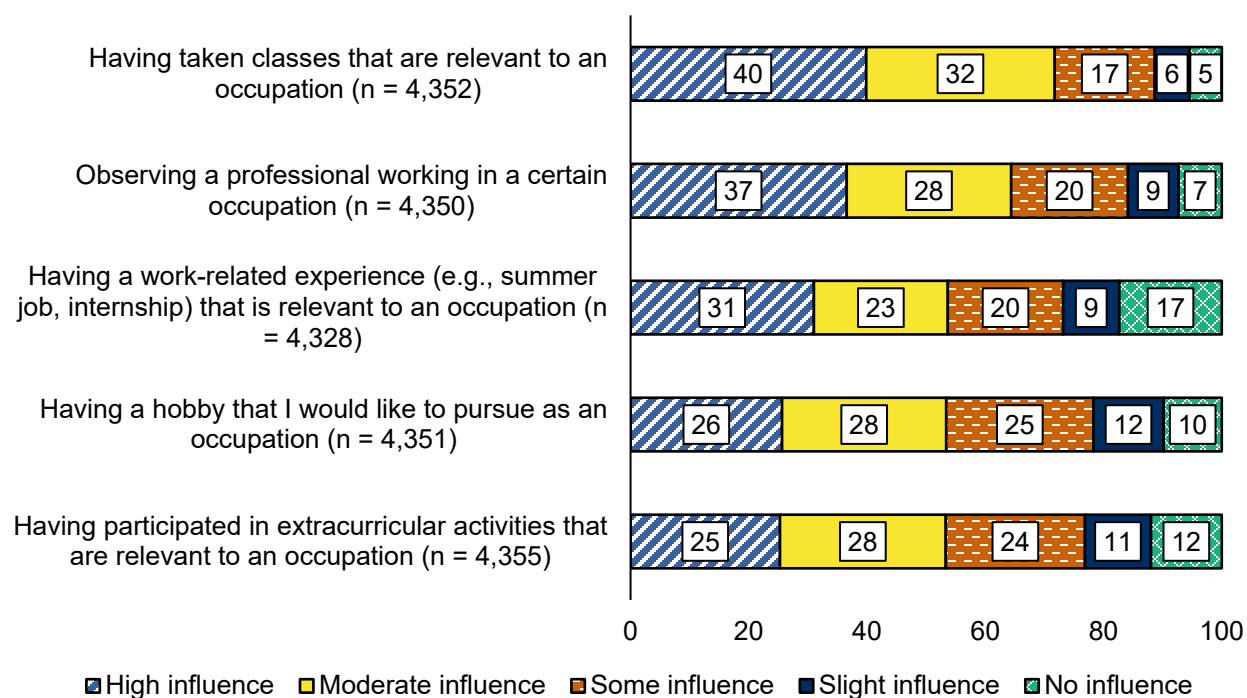**Figure 5.** Percentages of Students Rating Influence of People When Choosing Careers

Note. Percentages might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Students were also asked an open-ended question about how they thought people or experiences had influenced or would influence their career choices. After using qualitative analysis to review responses from 1,697 students, five themes emerged (based on 1,561 responses that could be assigned to a theme).[4] One theme involved people encouraging students' interests and passions by providing opportunities for them to cultivate talents and explore what they might like. This also included serving as role models, such as a "passionate teacher" or "women in journalism" showing their love for a career. A second theme involved people motivating or inspiring students to pursue a career. This included seeing others having an impact through their careers or following in the footsteps of family members, like the student who wrote, "My mom and aunts were all nurses so I want to be one too." A third theme involved people increasing students' knowledge of themselves and careers by having students watch others in occupations to see if those fields would or would not be a good fit for them, along with finding out the pros (i.e., job flexibility) and cons (i.e., long work hours) of different careers. A fourth theme involved having people reinforce or affirm students' choices by supporting their career interests or career decisions. The final theme involved people encouraging students to do what they want to do, such as choosing a career "based on joy it brings" or "pursue passions" and advising them on options and things to consider when making choices that would best fit them.

Interestingly, the total number of high-influence people that students selected had a statistically significant but negative relationship with being confident in their ability to build needed career knowledge and skills (see Table A4 in the Appendix). In other words, the more high-influence people that students identified, the less confident they were about building required knowledge and skills for the career. Meanwhile, the total number of high-influence people identified was not a statistically significant predictor for students having made a career choice or their confidence in choosing a good fit career and performing well in the career.
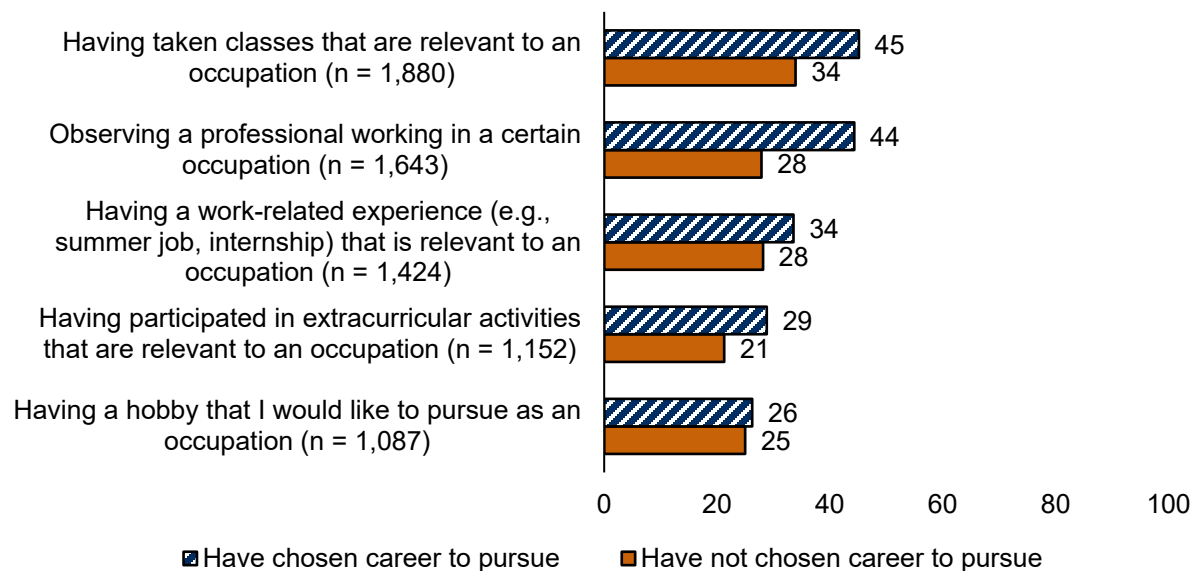
In addition to the influence of others, students were also asked how much influence different experiences had or would have on them when choosing an occupation. On average, students reported having 1.5 high-influence experiences. Three-quarters of students (72%) reported that taking classes relevant to an occupation had or would have a high or moderate influence on their career choices (Figure 6). Additionally, two-thirds (65%) indicated that observing a professional in a certain occupation had been or would be highly or moderately influential when choosing their careers. Over half of the surveyed students further cited that they were or would be influenced by occupation-related experiences (54%), by participating in a hobby (54%), and by engaging in extracurricular activities (53%).

Figure 6. Percentages of Students Rating Influence of Experiences When Choosing Careers

Note. Percentages might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Comparing students' high-influence experiences, more students who had chosen careers were or would be highly influenced across experiences than those who had not (Figure 7). There was a 16% difference between these groups as it related to the high influence of observing a professional working in a certain occupation and an 11% difference for taking classes relevant to an occupation. A higher percentage of students with chosen careers than students without chosen careers also reported that occupation-relevant extracurricular activities (by 8%) and work-related experiences (by 6%) had or would have a high influence on their choices.

Figure 7. Percentages of Students Rating High Influence of Experiences by Career Choice Status

Note. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.
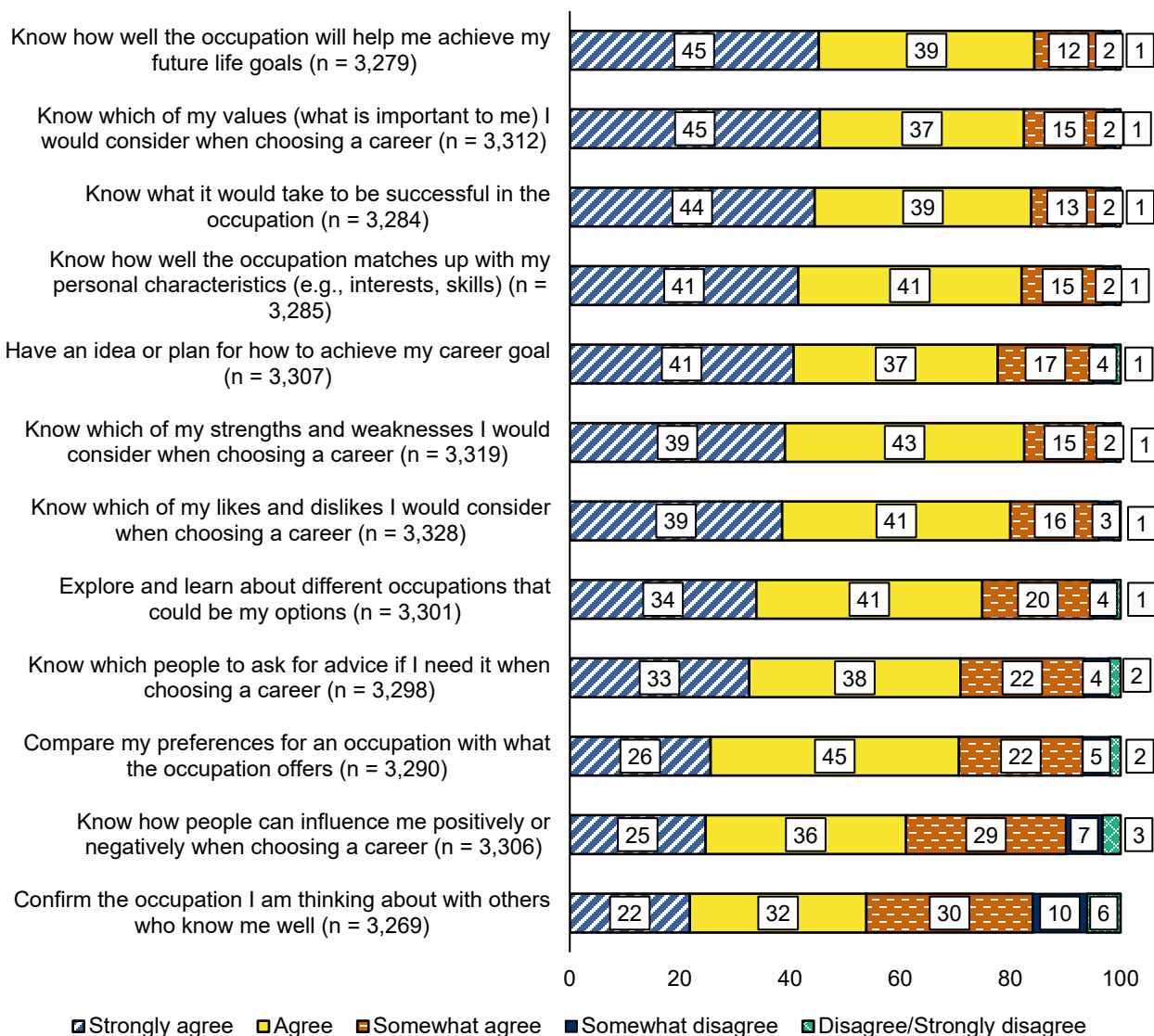
Returning to students' open-ended responses about how they thought people or experiences would influence or had influenced their career choices, four themes emerged. The first theme involved students developing their interests and passions by taking classes in school and through life experiences such as reading books, watching movies, playing computer games, riding roller coasters, and volunteering. The second theme involved being motivated by negative experiences, for example, experiences associated with living in poverty leading to a desire to do better through their career or the experiences of being "scared of mean dentists" leading to the desire to help kids feel good going to the dentist. Another theme involved students increasing their knowledge of themselves and careers by deciding what they personally like and dislike from their varied experiences and by exploring different work environments and work expectations on the job. The final theme involved having job-related experiences that confirmed career choices, like a job shadow and knowing that "doing the job reinforces my choice."

The regression analysis revealed that the total number of experiences a student considered to be very important was a significant predictor of whether a student had decided on a career to pursue (see Table A2 in Appendix). For every extra experience a student considered to be very important, the odds of having made a career choice increased by 7%, holding constant all other variables. Additionally, the total number of experiences a student considered to be very important was also positively associated with students' career confidence. After holding other variables in the models constant,[3] it was still a significant predictor of students' confidence in their career choices being a good fit, confidence in their ability to build the knowledge and skills needed for their careers, and confidence in performing well in those careers. The more

experiences students thought had or would have a high influence, the higher their career confidence.

Students Know What It Takes to Make Good Fit Career Choices

A majority of surveyed students (ranging from 54% to 84%) strongly agreed or agreed that it takes each of the 12 factors to make a good fit career choice (Figure 8). Over three-quarters of the students strongly agreed or agreed that making good fit career choices included knowing which personal characteristics such as values (82%), strengths and weaknesses (82%), and likes and dislikes (80%) they would consider when choosing careers. Students also strongly agreed or agreed that good fit choices involved evaluating the match between occupations and achieving future life goals (84%), personal characteristics such as interests and skills (82%), and occupation preferences (71%). Further, three-quarters or more of students reported this same level of agreement for the good fit choice factors of knowing what it takes to be successful in occupations (83%), having a plan for how to achieve career goals (78%), and exploring occupations (75%). A majority of students also strongly agreed or agreed about the role of people in making career choices that are a good fit, which related to knowing who to ask for advice (71%), understanding how they may influence career choices (61%), and confirming choices with others (54%).

Figure 8. Percentages of Students Rating Level of Agreement on Factors for a Good Fit Career Choice

Factor	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree/Strongly disagree
Know how well the occupation will help me achieve my future life goals (n = 3,279)	45	39	12	2	1
Know which of my values (what is important to me) I would consider when choosing a career (n = 3,312)	45	37	15	2	1
Know what it would take to be successful in the occupation (n = 3,284)	44	39	13	2	1
Know how well the occupation matches up with my personal characteristics (e.g., interests, skills) (n = 3,285)	41	41	15	2	1
Have an idea or plan for how to achieve my career goal (n = 3,307)	41	37	17	4	1
Know which of my strengths and weaknesses I would consider when choosing a career (n = 3,319)	39	43	15	2	1
Know which of my likes and dislikes I would consider when choosing a career (n = 3,328)	39	41	16	3	1
Explore and learn about different occupations that could be my options (n = 3,301)	34	41	20	4	1
Know which people to ask for advice if I need it when choosing a career (n = 3,298)	33	38	22	4	2
Compare my preferences for an occupation with what the occupation offers (n = 3,290)	26	45	22	5	2
Know how people can influence me positively or negatively when choosing a career (n = 3,306)	25	36	29	7	3
Confirm the occupation I am thinking about with others who know me well (n = 3,269)	22	32	30	10	6

Legend: ◪ Strongly agree   ▢ Agree   ▤ Somewhat agree   ▪ Somewhat disagree   ▨ Disagree/Strongly disagree

Note. Percentages might not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Although the total number of factors that students strongly agreed would support making good fit career choices was not a significant predictor for whether students had a chosen career, it did have a statistically positive relationship with all three aspects of career confidence. The more factors students strongly agreed would support making good fit career choices, the higher their confidence in their career choices being a good fit, in their ability to build the knowledge and skills needed for their careers, and in performing well in those careers.

Career Choices Come with Challenges

In an open-ended question, we asked students to identify the biggest challenge they have had or thought they would have when choosing an occupation to pursue. By analyzing the responses from 1,882 students,[4] we learned that they had experienced or anticipated a range of challenges. Table 1 ranks the top themes (based on 1,789 responses that were able to be assigned a theme) that related to students' identified challenges, which are described below.

Table 1. Students' Top Challenges When Making Career Choices

Top challenges (by rank order)
Options and Fit (n = 427)
Barriers to success (n = 342)
Training and Qualifications (n = 299)
Making compromises (n = 260)
Future opportunities (n = 236)
Commitment to a choice (n = 225)

Options and Fit

Many students indicated that it was a challenge to decide on an occupation for a wide range of reasons. For some, there were too many options to choose from. For others, there was a lack of understanding of the available options, and it would take too much effort to research each option. There were also students who did not know what they liked about an option or were not able to figure out what they wanted to do. Other students found it difficult to identify careers that would be a good fit for them. These thoughts were reflected in the comments of two students:

> "The biggest challenge I have had while choosing an occupation to pursue is sorting through all the options available to me. It's been difficult to decide which careers are practical as well as enjoyable as well as compatible with my goals in life."

> "For me, I think finding an occupation that fits my needs and my personality, relates to my passions and skills, and provides me with the income I'd like to make will be a big challenge."

Barriers to Success

There were also students challenged by their own insecurities, such as a lack of confidence, self-doubt, or indecision. Others were overwhelmed by fear, helplessness, or stress at the prospect of making a career choice. Still others lacked the motivation or focus needed to engage in the career choice process. These barriers are captured by three students:

> "I think my biggest challenge that I will have when choosing an occupation to pursue is that I will doubt myself and convince myself that I won't be able to do it."

> "I am completely overwhelmed with the idea of choosing a career at 17 years old. It stresses me out that there are thousands of career paths, but I don't understand any of them."

> "I think I sometimes struggle with truly knowing myself. I often lack a thorough plan of action, as well as motivation which will be difficult when choosing an occupation to pursue."

Another barrier some students pointed to was the time and resources needed to obtain an education. In addition to worries about investing money and years in schooling, the burden of financial debt after college was a concern. Some students were also concerned with supporting their family and maintaining financial security while going to school in pursuit of a career. This was highlighted by three students:

> "I think my biggest challenge when picking a career would be the long years in school and financial debt when leaving college."

> "I think the biggest challenge for me is going to be finding a sustainable long-term plan for funding my education to prepare for my career. I have ideas for occupations I want to pursue, but I don't know how I will afford the education required to pursue those paths."

> "The number of years of school without a full-time job to assist my family."

There were students who referred to personal barriers as they considered their career choices. These related to being a certain gender or race, having English as a second language, or having a learning disability. Some students who struggled with mental health or physical health conditions thought about career choices and the potential experience in a particular career through the lens of these conditions. In the words of two students describing their personal barriers:

> "Being a female in a male dominant industry. I will have to show and prove myself accountable and best represent my clients especially with their finances since I want to be a Certified Financial Planner."

> "Because my mother tongue is Chinese, and my second language is English. What I am most worried about is the language problem. Can I use English fluently in my work, be able to skillfully use the knowledge and skills I have learned and correctly apply them to my work…"

Training & Qualifications

Some students focused on the difficulties associated with building their qualifications. These involved the challenge of getting internships and job shadows to gain experiences that would better prepare them for their careers. In addition, it was a challenge for students to find people and make connections that could help them be more successful in their choice of careers. This was reflected by the comments of two students:

> "I think the most challenging thing is getting good opportunities for things like shadowing or experiences, since they're very hard to come by."

> "My biggest challenge regarding my chosen occupation is knowing that starting right out of college, there is a certain degree of networking and extensive internships, and I must meet the right people…"

There were also students concerned about aspects of their personality or skills conflicting with the occupation-specific skills needed in their preferred careers. Some were introverted or struggled with communication skills but wanted to pursue careers that involved working with people. Others were concerned with their strength in specific academic areas, knowing their career choices demanded higher levels of these skills. This is illustrated in comments from two students:

> "I have chosen the occupation I want to pursue, but I'm worried about the need for higher math classes. I'm not the best at trigonometry or calculus, but I will be using both of those in my career."

> "Considering my introverted nature, I sometimes find it tough to open up to people. I'm going to have to work with other people in my career choice, so I'm going to have to grow my confidence and communication skills."

Other students were concerned about their college readiness. These students were not sure if they had the qualifications needed for college admissions and pointed to challenges with high school grades, standardized test scores, and other college admissions criteria. These concerns are highlighted by three students:

> "I have had to make sure that I take difficult classes and participate in many extracurricular activities so I stand out in the college applications."

> "My grades. I am scared what people will see on paper will have them choose someone else over me and never give me a chance. I am not a nobel prize winner, but I have the heart of one."

> "So far my biggest challenge is real world competition to get into a good college to pursue my intended major of business. To achieve this I need to gain a better SAT/ACT score that can make me stand out to colleges compared to my peers."

Another challenge for some students revolved around how difficult it would be to complete the training for their careers. They highlighted the need to take rigorous courses and the extensive workload. These students also worried about what it would take to complete graduate or medical school and what this future would be like. Some referred to competition with peers pursuing the same career as an added challenge. These concerns are conveyed by comments from two students:

> "The occupation I am choosing to pursue requires a very rigorous and demanding education pathway, so this will require much attention and focus when going to college for my occupation."

> "Challenging coursework, and navigating competition in a rapidly changing industry."

Making Compromises

There were students challenged by the need to make concessions when choosing their careers. Some were concerned about having to choose an occupation they did not enjoy as much because they wanted higher or more stable income or wanted to stay near their families. Others were concerned about balancing multiple interests and priorities while only being able to choose one career option. The opinions of others also made career choices difficult for some students, especially when family members disagreed with their choices or wanted them to pursue a particular career path. In the words of three students:

> "Accepting that pursuing my passion for art meant that I would not have a high and/or stable salary. I had to debate on whether or not I wanted to give up stability for my passion."

> "I think the biggest challenge will be weighing the pros and cons of different career paths, such as pay and benefits or maybe taking a price cut to do something you enjoy a little more, and the challenge here is determining what factors mean the most to me."

> "Balancing what my family wants and what I want."

Future Opportunities

Some students were challenged to make career choices because of questions related to their future job prospects and job success. They wondered whether they would be able to find jobs given shifts in the job market and increased competition. These students were also concerned about where the jobs would be located, the pay, and whether the work would be stable. As for success on the job, students had concerns about their ability to perform their jobs well and be promoted if they chose a certain career, as shown in these students' comments:

> "It's hard to know what I will actually be doing in a job and if I'm good at doing those things. Anyone could have the head knowledge required, but do I have what it takes to apply that knowledge?"

> "I think that the biggest challenge when going into a career as an editor or publisher is the competitive job market."

> "Deciding whether or not it will be stable and pay the bills."

Some students were also challenged by their concerns related to their future lifestyle in a career. There was a desire for careers where they could maintain both a personal life and a social life while building their careers. These students wondered about the amount of work that would be required and the possibility of having work-life balance and flexibility in their careers. Some were further concerned about the work environment of their future occupation. These challenges are highlighted by three students:

"I want to do something that I love but still be able to build a family and have time for friends."

"The biggest challenge I had when choosing an occupation to pursue was the work environment I would be in. For me, having a flexible schedule is crucial in my occupation choice. I tend to dislike having a repetitive schedule throughout my life."

"The biggest challenge will most likely be finding the right occupation where I can manage my time and not have it all towards work and no life outside of that."

Commitment to a Choice

There were also students challenged by their ability to commit to a career choice. They were not sure whether they would stick with a certain career and did not want to get stuck in a career they did not like. Some were not sure whether they would be happy in their chosen careers and experience enjoyment, passion, or fulfillment as they pursued them. Still others wanted to be certain about their career choices and were concerned about not having that certainty. These concerns are illustrated by comments from three students:

"Choosing a career that I'm sure will make me happy could be difficult. I believe that I will be good at almost anything I choose to do, but I want to make sure that I'm happy doing it."

"I would say the biggest challenge pertaining to my future occupation is certainty. I don't want to put myself through years of schooling just to realize I don't want to pursue my career choice anymore. I want to be certain that I'm making the right choice."

"Making a decision and sticking with it, I worry I'll somehow not end up liking it and be stuck in a job I hate."

Discussion

In this study, we focused our investigation on how high school students make career choices. We learned about the importance of different reasons that motivate students' career decisions, along with the extent to which people and experiences influence students' choices. The students also told us what factors they thought would allow them to make career choices that would be a good fit. In addition, we examined these areas of focus in relation to deciding on a career and levels of confidence that they would choose careers with good fit, build the requisite career knowledge and skills, and perform well in their careers. Finally, we gathered students' thoughts on the biggest challenges they experienced or anticipated when choosing careers.

A majority of the surveyed students thought multiple personally relevant and occupation-specific reasons would be very or moderately important to consider when choosing careers. These students cited interests/passions and skills/abilities as the most important reasons overall, indicating that students put these personally relevant characteristics front and center as essential career choice considerations. This is supported by research that has shown interests

and self-rated abilities as strong predictors of occupational choice (Tracey & Hopkins, 2001), with interests being the stronger predictor of choice (Hanna & Rounds, 2020; Lent & Brown, 2019). Half of students thought it very important to consider the education or training needed for an occupation, suggesting that their career choices may be motivated by the level or type of education that typically functions as a prerequisite to entering these careers. Interestingly, an ECMC Foundation (2022) survey of high school students found that 52% were open to a different educational path than a four-year degree and 73% thought postsecondary education should be a direct path to a career. With three-quarters of the students in this study reporting that it was very or moderately important to consider average occupation income and benefits when choosing careers, they may also be motivated by financial security or the ability to live a certain lifestyle. Approximately two-thirds of students rated this same degree of importance for work expectations, work features, and work setting as choice considerations, which emphasizes that students understand the complexity and fruitfulness of incorporating different aspects of occupational characteristics into their career decision-making.

Along with considering personally relevant and occupation-specific reasons for choosing careers, students thought people and experiences would be differentially influential in their career choices. Nearly half of the surveyed students indicated that family members had higher levels of influence than other groups of people, which is reinforced by literature showing that parents play a critical role in adolescents' career aspirations (Qi et al., 2024) and career choices (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). Research has also suggested that individuals with "a sense of obligation to family also perceive that their family has influenced their decision making" (Fouad et al., 2016, p. 209). Family members can shape students' career choices in numerous ways. For example, they can serve as role models working in different careers, which may inspire or dissuade students from pursuing those careers (Valentine, 2023). Family members can encourage students to pursue their interests and passions, motivating their future career choices (Bates, 2015). Parents can have expectations for their children and want them to pursue careers they believe are stable, prestigious, or some combination of parent-desired characteristics (Lloyd et al., 2018). Families can also share information about various careers, discuss their pros and cons, and support students as they learn about the world of work.

Additionally, teachers, counselors, and friends may influence students' career choices. Teachers can motivate and inspire students, which can help them cultivate their talents and explore various career fields (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017). Teachers are also in a position to encourage students to learn from real-world applications and help them understand how academic subjects relate to various careers. School or career counselors have been trained to help students articulate how their interests, values, and skills are aligned with career options. They can further help students prioritize what personal characteristics will guide career choices and together consider how to overcome potential challenges along their career paths. Friends can share their own career aspirations and experiences, which can help students gain insights into different career paths. Friends can also offer support, reinforcing students' career interests and career choices (Grygo, 2006). These influences can help students make more informed and confident career choices, ultimately leading to greater career satisfaction and success.

Over half of students pointed to experiences as highly or moderately influential in their career choices, with taking classes relevant to an occupation being the most reported influential experience by nearly three-quarters of the students. Taking classes may be students' first introduction to different career fields that would otherwise be unfamiliar to them given their background and opportunities. Two-thirds of them also thought that observing professionals in occupations was or would be similarly influential, reinforcing the importance of vicarious learning. Additionally, slightly more than half of students considered experiences including participation in occupation-relevant experiences, hobbies, and extracurricular activities to be highly or moderately influential when making their career choices. These experiences can help students develop and clarify their interests and learn more about what they may be good at or what they want to avoid. Work-related experiences are valuable opportunities, which positively influence career planning and future employability (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

It is increasingly important for high school students to make good fit career choices as they transition to college or work after graduation. For those going to college, good fit choices can help students take occupation-relevant courses earlier and seek out experiences that support future job prospects (Hora et al., 2021). This can help students better meet the increasing demand for a return on investment from pursuing postsecondary education. For students going directly into the workforce, good fit choices can make this transition more successful by enabling students to pursue work that is well-aligned with their personally relevant characteristics and occupation preferences. More than three-quarters of the high school students in this study agreed that good fit career choices should take into consideration their personal characteristics (values, interests, skills) and how well these characteristics match up with the corresponding characteristics of occupations. This is reinforced by the fact that well-aligned career choices predict future outcomes such as job performance and job satisfaction (Nye et al., 2012; Swaney et al., 2012; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011). Three-quarters or more of students also indicated a similar level of agreement about good fit career choices involving the exploration of occupations and planning for achieving career goals. This is consistent with findings from a recent report where most surveyed high school students agreed that exploring careers would make them more informed when making choices and that planning for their careers would help make them more successful (Bobek & Schnieders, 2025).

Most of the surveyed students overall were very or moderately confident about making good fit career choices and similarly confident about building the knowledge and skills for their careers along with performing well in their careers. At the same time, there were significant differences in confidence between students who had chosen a career and those who had not yet chosen a career. Far more students with a career choice than without a career choice (differences ranging from 16% to 28%) were very confident about these career choice consequences. Although we cannot confirm the causal relationship due to the research methods used in the study, it is possible that having a clear direction can enhance students' confidence in their future prospects, not only about making a good fit choice but also the actions needed to learn and do well in a career. There were also differences (ranging from 1% to 18% with an average of 10%) between students who had and had not chosen a career in the reasons (e.g., education/training needed for a career, work tasks, interests) they considered very important when choosing a career with students who had chosen a career having a higher percentage across reasons. This

suggests that students who had chosen a career may be more thorough in their decision-making process, considering the importance they attributed to a wider range of reasons motivating their career choices.

A regression analysis showed the number of reasons a student considered very important for choosing an occupation and the number of high-influence experiences listed by students were significant predictors of whether a student decided on a career. This result indicated that thoroughly considering various reasons for choosing a career and using experiences to support the decision-making process could potentially help students make their career choices. Additionally, regression results also revealed that the number of reasons a student considered very important for choosing an occupation, the number of high-influence experiences indicated by students, and the number of factors students agreed would support making good fit career choices significantly predicted their confidence in choosing a career that would be a good fit, in building the knowledge and skills needed for their careers, and in performing well in their careers. These findings highlight that high school students who consider various reasons when choosing careers, recognize what diverse experiences offer, and understand the significance of multiple factors when making career choices have greater confidence in their choices and their career behaviors. It is imperative for students to be confident in their career decisions as this propels them toward achieving their goals.

Interestingly, having more high-influence people in a student's life is linked to lower confidence in building career knowledge and skills. While the reason for this result is not clear, research has shown that influential individuals can act as either supports or barriers to confidence and behavior. For example, research by Chang and Wang (2025) found that low parental involvement reduced Chinese vocational students' career planning abilities, social support, and self-efficacy. Dennis et al. (2005) showed that peer support improves college GPA, adjustment, and commitment, while its absence leads to poorer outcomes. In the area of medicine education, Artino (2012) emphasized that teachers should build both skills and confidence in students, suggesting that confidence is an important part of skill development. Thus, having many influential figures might reduce support or create confusion through conflicting advice and information.

Findings from this study showed that being career decided is positively related to career confidence (or self-efficacy in having made good fit career choices), building career knowledge and skills, and performing well in careers. This is consistent with findings of a longitudinal study (Creed et al., 2005) where career-decided students reported higher levels of career planning/exploration, career decision-making self-efficacy, and life satisfaction at both time 1 (in Grade 8) and time 2 (in Grade 10). This is partially consistent with research by Lent et al. (2019) that focused on the longitudinal relationship between self-efficacy and career decidedness across three time points among college students. That study found support for self-efficacy predicting career decidedness across time points and career decidedness predicting self-efficacy from time 1 to time 2. Another longitudinal study (Willhardt et al., 2025) using four points across time among individuals ranging in age between 15 to 25 who were not employed, in school, or in training at the start of the study found that self-efficacy was related to career decidedness across time points and career decidedness fostered self-efficacy from time 3 to

time 4, although this latter relationship was not maintained in other models. Career decidedness did predict subsequent outcomes, including secured employment or apprenticeships or a return to school. This supports the idea that when students have made a career decision, they subsequently engage in experiences that reinforce their choices, such as taking relevant courses, seeking internships, or talking to professionals in the field. A limitation of the current study is that it focused on one point in time, which does not allow for examining the more complex longitudinal relationships between career decidedness and self-efficacy. What is clear is that career decision self-efficacy is important as an antecedent to and a consequence of the career choice process, and it is critical to develop and continue to foster this self-efficacy before and after making a career choice.

There are key sources that contribute to self-efficacy. These sources involve experiencing success or mastery of tasks, vicarious learning through observation of successful models, verbal persuasion through exposure to supportive messages, and facilitative affective states or positive emotion (e.g., feeling good when thinking about a career choice; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2017). Interventions focusing on these sources for developing and enhancing self-efficacy can potentially help career-undecided students become more sure about their careers and reinforce the career decisions students have already made. Students with higher career self-efficacy can also better address the challenges they may face as they make career choices.

From having too many career options or a lack of information to the psychological barriers of self-doubt and fear, there are students who face a variety of obstacles as they make career choices. Financial concerns, such as the burden of educational debt and the need to support a family while pursuing a career, further complicate making career choices. Personal barriers such as language proficiency and health conditions add additional complexity. Further, the difficulties associated with building qualifications, such as securing internships and networking, and concerns about college readiness and the rigorous demands of certain career paths weigh heavily on some students' minds. The need to make compromises, balance multiple interests, and consider future job prospects and work-life balance are also significant when deciding future careers. And the ability to commit to a career choice and the fear of making the wrong decision can be daunting. These challenges reinforce the importance of providing comprehensive supports as students navigate their career choice process.

Based on findings from this study, there are actions that schools could take to support students in making more informed and confident career choices and enhance their preparedness for a successful transition to college or the workforce.

Help students develop their unique profiles. Educators and counselors play an important role in helping students build their personalized profiles of interests, values, skills, abilities, and preferences. These profiles can guide students in tailoring their education and exploring careers that align with their profiles. To support this process, implement assessments to help students better understand their strengths, interests, and values. Use assessment results to guide individualized education and career plans that encourage exploration of career paths aligned with their unique profiles, that enable students to articulate their aspirations and understand the

connections between personal characteristics and occupational options, and that identify academic areas for growth that would be essential for these potential careers.

Connect students with professionals in relevant career fields. Given students' perceptions of the influence of people in careers similar to those they want to pursue, it is essential to provide opportunities for students to interact and learn from these professionals. One approach is to develop mentorship programs that pair students with professionals in their areas of interest, fostering meaningful relationships and real-world insights. Another strategy is to encourage networking by organizing events where students can meet and interact with alumni and industry experts. Finally, leverage virtual platforms to connect students with professionals beyond the local community, expanding their awareness of career possibilities and the environments in which they may work in the future.

Leverage classroom experiences for career perceptions. With students emphasizing that classes are important for learning about careers, educators can enhance these learning experiences using different approaches. Design curriculum that emphasizes the real-world application of academic content, helping students understand how academic subjects relate to various careers. Incorporate project-based learning and collaborative assignments that simulate workplace scenarios and problem-solving tasks. Additionally, educators and staff can share their own career journeys, illustrating the diverse career paths people can take and the experiences that shaped their career choices.

Emphasize characteristics of good fit choices in career planning activities. When engaging students in career planning activities, build in opportunities to discuss and reflect on what makes a career a good fit for them. Encourage students to identify and evaluate various factors and experiences that contribute to making informed career choices or confirming choices. Provide additional support to undecided students by helping them explore their interests and potential career paths, along with helping them make connections between their personal characteristics and the corresponding characteristics of occupations, which could enhance their confidence and decision-making abilities.

Build confidence for career choices. When students understand what motivates them and what influences their career choices, they are more likely to feel confident in those choices. Educators and counselors can help students build their confidence by celebrating achievements and progress toward career goals, reinforcing students' confidence in their abilities. Encourage students to identify trusted individuals who will support them as they navigate the career decision-making process. Teach students to view challenges as opportunities for learning and development and facilitate discussions on how they have overcome setbacks in their past and how they might address them in the future using real life scenarios focused on making education and career choices.

Integrate career-related experiences throughout high school. To better prepare students for career choices, intentionally focus on career planning throughout high school rather than once a year when creating plans or right before they make important decisions about their futures. Embed developmentally appropriate career planning activities into each year of high school,

ensuring that career education evolves alongside students' growth in interests and skills. Support students in creating and updating individualized career plans, with regular check-ins and guidance from teachers and counselors. Offer resources and guidance on accessing career-relevant job shadows or volunteer opportunities, training programs, and additional qualifications needed for specific career paths.

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Notes

[1] Three chi-square tests of independence were conducted to explore whether deciding on a career was associated with each area of career confidence (i.e., choosing a career that will be a good fit, building knowledge and skills needed for chosen career, and performing well in chosen career). Students' responses on their career choice status were combined into two groups: Yes (the option "Yes, I have decided the occupation I want to pursue") and No (the options "No, I have some options in mind but have not decided which to pursue" and "No, I have not thought about which occupation[s] to pursue"). There were five levels of career confidence (i.e., very confident, moderately confident, somewhat confident, slightly confident, and not confident). Chi-square results for each career confidence area were as follows: Choosing a career that will be a good fit (X^2 = 3.82, p < .001), Building knowledge and skills needed for chosen career (X^2 = 1.56, p < .001), and Performing well in chosen career (X^2 = 1.13, p < .001). All three tests were significant at the alpha level of .05. The statistics from the chi-square tests reflect the weighting.

[2] A logistic regression analysis was conducted to examine the potential factors that were associated with whether a student made a career choice. The independent variables were the number of reasons (i.e., interests, work tasks) a student considered very important for choosing an occupation, the number of people the student thought had or would have a high influence on them when choosing an occupation, the number of experiences (i.e., internship, classes) the student thought had or would have a high influence on them when choosing an occupation, and the total number of factors that students strongly agreed would support making good fit occupation choices. See the Technical Appendix for the relevant questions and regression statistics. We also included covariates in the model, including race/ethnicity, gender, family income, and parental education level. Four dummy variables were created to represent race/ethnicity (i.e., Asian, Black, Latinx, and other race/ethnicity) with White being the reference group. Due to low *n* counts, the Other group included Native American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races/ethnicities. For gender, the dummy variable "male" was included in the model with female being the reference group. For family income, four dummy variables were created to represent five groups: low income (annual family income less than $36,000; reference group), low-moderate income (annual family income between $36,000 and $60,000), high-moderate income (annual family income between $60,001 and $100,000), high income (annual family income more than $100,000), and family income information missing. There was a considerable amount of missing data for the family income variable (30% in the population). We considered this amount too large to impute these data during the process of weighting. Therefore, to maximize the number of cases used in the regression models, we included a missing category for this variable, even though its interpretation could be challenging. For parental education, two dummy variables were created to represent three groups: students whose caregiver(s) did not have any college experience (reference group), students whose caregiver(s) had some college experience but did not have a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, and students whose caregiver(s) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Students who

did not report the education level of their parent(s)/guardians were excluded from this analysis due to low n counts.

[3] Three multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the potential factors that could predict career confidence in each of the three aspects—choosing a career that will be a good fit, building knowledge and skills needed for chosen career, and performing well in chosen career. The independent variables and covariates were the same as those in Note 2, except that whether or not students had decided on a career to pursue was also included as an independent variable. Literature has found relationships between each independent variable and career confidence. The chi-squared tests in this study also demonstrated some of these relationships. We used the regression models to examine whether such relationships still hold after we controlled for all the other variables (including the covariates).

[4] Thematic qualitative analysis procedures were conducted to analyze students' responses to open-ended questions. All responses were read, segmented by relevance (irrelevant comments were excluded), and coded by two qualitative research experts to construct tentative categories. The authors would like to thank Nola Daley and Yao Sun for their contribution to the qualitative coding. These categories were then reviewed and verified by a third qualitative research expert. Categories were examined and grouped into broader themes.

Technical Appendix

Sample

This survey study was designed to investigate how students made career decisions. The focus included how important it was to choose careers based on different criteria, influences of people and experiences on students' decisions, students' understanding of a good fit career, and their confidence in choosing a good fit career. This report summarized findings from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

The target population was high school students who registered for the July 2024 ACT National test and reported that they were residing in the United States. The sampled population was $N =$ 56,455 and did not include students who opted out of ACT communications or who were included in recent student survey samples. A stratified random sample of 45,500 Grade 11 and Grade 12 high school students nationwide was drawn from the sampled population for this study. These students were presumed to be college-bound, although it is possible that some of them will not attend college. The sample was stratified on race/ethnicity.

Students were invited via email to participate in the online survey. The survey opened on July 13th, 2024, and closed on August 16th, 2024. A total of 4,367 students answered at least half of the required questions (i.e., the selected-response questions). This group was used as the analytical sample of the survey (a response rate of 10%). This response rate is not unusual for online surveys, and we do not know whether nonrespondents' opinions would have been similar to those of the respondents, which is a limitation of this study.

We used propensity weighting to weight the responses to match the sampled population, compensating for the differences in sample size and the overrepresentation of respondents from subgroups. We also conducted a multiple imputation to address the issue of missing data in calculating weights. The imputed data were only used for the purpose of weighting and reporting demographics and were not used in survey question analyses.

Student characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, family income, parental education) are reported in Table A1 for the survey's sampled population, the analytical sample, and the weighted analytical sample. All the characteristics in the table were reported by students and were collected when the students registered for the ACT test. Also, students who chose to participate in the survey were asked to provide additional information about family income and parental education at the end of the survey due to the relatively high rates of missing data for these two characteristics in the ACT registration data.

Table A1. Characteristics of the Sampled Population, Analytical Sample, and Weighted Analytical Sample (Percentage[a])

Characteristic	Group	Sampled population (N = 56,455)	Analytical sample (n = 4,367)	Weighted analytical sample (n = 4,367)
Gender[b]	Female	59	71	59
	Male	41	29	41
Race/ethnicity[b]	Asian	10	15	10
	Black/African American	11	10	11
	Hispanic/Latinx	12	11	12
	Other[c]	6	6	6
	White	61	58	61
Family income	<$36,000	6	8	6
	$36,000 to $60,000	7	11	7
	$60,000 to $100,000	13	18	13
	More than $100,000	45	51	45
	Family income missing	29	12	29
Parental education[d]	No college	10	9	10
	Some college	13	14	13
	College or higher	78	77	78

[a] If some percentages in the table do not add up to 100%, it is due to rounding.

[b] The percentages of gender and race/ethnicity were calculated using the data from multiple imputation.

[c] Other races/ethnicities include Native American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races/ethnicities.

[d] Parental education levels: No college = less than high school or high school graduate/GED; Some college = business/technical school, certificate program, some college with no degree or certificate, or associate's degree (2 year); College or higher = bachelor's degree (4 year) or higher. The percentages of the parental education levels were calculated using the data from multiple imputation.

Regression Results Tables

Table A2. Weighted Logistic Regression Coefficients for Predicting Whether Deciding a Career to Pursue

Independent variable	Estimate	Standard error	z (Wald statistic)	p
(Intercept)*	0.16	0.23	0.69	0.49
Asian	−0.09	0.16	−0.60	0.55
Black	0.53	0.17	3.14	0.00
Hispanic/Latinx	0.03	0.15	0.20	0.84
Other race/ethnicity	−0.24	0.19	−1.25	0.21
Male	−0.30	0.09	−3.35	0.00
Income middle group 1	0.09	0.24	0.38	0.70
Income middle group 2	0.08	0.22	0.38	0.70
High income	0.00	0.21	−0.02	0.99
Missing income	−0.33	0.22	−1.45	0.15
Parent education: some college	−0.26	0.21	−1.26	0.21
Parent education: college	−0.59	0.19	−3.17	0.00
Total number very important reasons*	0.14	0.02	6.23	0.00
Total number high influence people	−0.08	0.05	−1.41	0.16
Total number high influence experiences**	0.07	0.03	2.16	0.03
Total number strongly agree good fit factors	0.01	0.01	0.93	0.35

*Significant at $p < .001$; **Significant at $p < .05$

Table A3. Weighted Regression Coefficients for Predicting Confidence in Choosing a Career that will be a Good Fit

Independent variable	Estimate	Standard error	t	p
(Intercept)*	2.52	0.08	30.93	0.00
Asian	−0.13	0.06	−2.40	0.02
Black	0.00	0.06	0.02	0.98
Hispanic/Latinx	−0.08	0.05	−1.43	0.15
Other race/ethnicity	0.09	0.07	1.24	0.22
Male	−0.01	0.03	−0.37	0.71
Income middle group 1	−0.05	0.08	−0.69	0.49
Income middle group 2	0.00	0.07	−0.03	0.97
High income	0.00	0.07	−0.01	0.99
Missing income	−0.18	0.08	−2.32	0.02
Parent education: some college	0.08	0.07	1.14	0.25
Parent education: college	0.09	0.06	1.47	0.14
Total number very important reasons	0.02	0.01	2.00	0.05
Total number high influence people	−0.02	0.02	−1.21	0.23
Total number high influence experiences*	0.07	0.01	6.25	0.00
Total number strongly agree good fit factors*	0.04	0.01	8.60	0.00
Has chosen career*	0.56	0.03	17.47	0.00

*Significant at $p < .001$

Table A4. Weighted Regression Coefficients for Predicting Confidence in Building Knowledge and Skills Needed for a Chosen Career

Independent variable	Estimate	Standard error	t	p
(Intercept)*	2.96	0.07	41.09	0.00
Asian	−0.17	0.05	−3.32	0.00
Black	−0.05	0.05	−1.03	0.30
Hispanic/Latinx	−0.12	0.05	−2.38	0.02
Other race/ethnicity	−0.03	0.06	−0.50	0.62
Male	−0.02	0.03	−0.64	0.53
Income middle group 1	−0.07	0.07	−1.02	0.31
Income middle group 2	0.06	0.07	0.97	0.33
High income	0.08	0.06	1.32	0.19
Missing income	−0.15	0.07	−2.12	0.03
Parent education: some college	0.01	0.06	0.24	0.81
Parent education: college	0.06	0.06	1.14	0.25
Total number very important reasons**	0.02	0.01	2.56	0.01
Total number high influence people*	−0.06	0.02	−3.58	0.00
Total number high influence experiences*	0.07	0.01	6.33	0.00
Total number strongly agree good fit factors*	0.04	0.00	8.37	0.00
Has chosen career*	0.32	0.03	11.26	0.00

*Significant at $p < .001$; **Significant at $p < .05$

Table A5. Weighted Regression Coefficients for Predicting Confidence in Performing Well in a Chosen Career

Independent variable	Estimate	Standard error	t	p
(Intercept)*	2.85	0.07	38.59	0.00
Asian	−0.17	0.05	−3.40	0.00
Black	0.02	0.05	0.42	0.67
Hispanic/Latinx	−0.06	0.05	−1.25	0.21
Other race/ethnicity	0.07	0.06	1.06	0.29
Male	−0.01	0.03	−0.26	0.79
Income middle group 1	−0.06	0.07	−0.81	0.42
Income middle group 2	0.02	0.07	0.25	0.80
High income	0.03	0.06	0.50	0.62
Missing income	−0.06	0.07	−0.91	0.36
Parent education: some college	0.13	0.06	2.01	0.05
Parent education: college	0.14	0.06	2.43	0.02
Total number very important reasons*	0.04	0.01	5.48	0.00
Total number high influence people	−0.01	0.02	−0.40	0.69
Total number high influence experiences*	0.04	0.01	3.57	0.00
Total number strongly agree good fit factors*	0.03	0.00	6.09	0.00
Has chosen career*	0.25	0.03	8.66	0.00

*Significant at $p < .001$

Survey Instrument

The following are the relevant survey items for this issue brief:

1. Have you decided which future occupation you want to pursue?

    o   Yes, I have decided the occupation I want to pursue
    o   No, I have some options in mind but have not decided which to pursue
    o   No, I have not thought about which occupation(s) to pursue

2. (If "Yes, I have decided the occupation I want to pursue" selected in Q1) How sure are you about your current choice of occupation? (Scale: not sure, slightly sure, somewhat sure, moderately sure, very sure)

3. (If "Yes, I have decided the occupation I want to pursue" selected in Q1) How satisfied are you about your current choice of occupation? (Scale: not satisfied, slightly satisfied, somewhat satisfied, moderately satisfied, very satisfied)

4. People choose occupations for many reasons. How important do you think each of the following is or will be for you when choosing the occupation you pursue? (Scale: not important, slightly important, somewhat important, moderately important, very important)

    *   My interests/passions
    *   My abilities/skills
    *   Education/training needed for the occupation
    *   Whether there is a growing number of jobs related to the occupation
    *   Average income of the occupation
    *   Work setting (e.g., indoors, outdoors, by yourself, with other people)
    *   Work tasks (e.g., making things, helping people, physical activity, managing others)
    *   Work features (e.g., challenging work, variety in the work)
    *   Work expectations (e.g., work schedule, remote work options)
    *   Work benefits (e.g., vacation time, opportunities for promotion)
    *   Other (please specify)_____

5. Some people may be influenced by others when choosing an occupation. How much influence do you think each of the following has had or will have when you are choosing an occupation? (Scale: no influence, slight influence, some influence, moderate influence, high influence)

    *   My family
    *   My friend
    *   Teacher
    *   School or career counselor
    *   Someone I know pursing the same occupation
    *   Other people (please specify)_____

6. Some people may be influenced by their experiences when choosing an occupation. How much influence do you think each of the following has had or will have when you are choosing an occupation? (Scale: no influence, slight influence, some influence, moderate influence, high influence)

    *   Having a hobby that I would like to pursue as an occupation
    *   Having participated in extracurricular activities that are relevant to an occupation
    *   Having taken classes that are relevant to an occupation
    *   Observing a professional working in a certain occupation
    *   Having a work-related experience (e.g., summer job, internship) that is relevant to an occupation

7. How do you think people in your life or your past experiences will influence or have influenced your occupation choice? (Open-ended)

8. Have you thought much about what it takes to make a good fit occupation choice? Fit means how well you match up with an occupation. To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? **To make a good fit occupation choice, I need to**: (Scale: strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree)

    *   know which of my likes and dislikes I would consider when choosing a career.
    *   know which of my strengths and weaknesses I would consider when choosing a career.
    *   know which of my values (what is important to me) I would consider when choosing a career.
    *   have an idea or plan for how to achieve my career goal.
    *   know how people can influence me positively or negatively when choosing a career.
    *   know how people can influence me positively or negatively when choosing a career.
    *   know which people to ask for advice if I need it when choosing a career.
    *   explore and learn about different occupations that could be my options.
    *   know what it would take to be successful in the occupation.
    *   compare my preferences for an occupation with what the occupation offers.
    *   know how well the occupation matches up with my personal characteristics (e.g., interests, skills).
    *   know how well the occupation will help me achieve my future life goals.
    *   confirm the occupation I am thinking about with others who know me well.

9. How confident are you about each of the following statements? (Scale: not confident, slightly confident, somewhat confident, moderately confident, very confident)

    - I will choose a career that will be a good fit for me
    - I can build the knowledge and skills needed for my chosen career
    - I will perform well in my chosen career

10. What is the biggest challenge you have had or think you will have when choosing an occupation to pursue? (Open-ended)

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