

How Brain Development Influences College and Careers



Today's students are faced with making life decisions at an early age. Examining the outcomes of those decisions while cross referencing biology paints an interesting picture. In America students graduate from high school around 18 years old. From there students must decide what's next in their life journey.

Broadly speaking most students decide to attend college, pursue a trade, enlist in the military, or transition directly to the workforce. According to the Social Security Administration men with bachelor's degrees earn approximately \$900,000 more in median lifetime earnings than high school graduates. Women with bachelor's degrees earn \$630,000 more¹. As you can see the lifetime income gap is significant and thus incentivizes students to pursue a college degree.

When parents or guardians are asked about their student's future plans, the response is usually "they want to pursue fill in blank field." This demonstrates that the post high decision is often solely up to the student. This is the typical process of the post high school decision but pitfalls and blind spots with this approach are everywhere.



Post High School Choices

Research from the Education Data Initiative states the average cost of college in the United States is \$35,720 per student per year. The cost has tripled in 20 years, with an annual growth rate of 6.8%². In this report, college refers to any postsecondary educational institution that offers an undergraduate degree program.

Considering lost income and loan interest, the ultimate price of the average bachelor's degree may be as high as \$400,793². These noteworthy decisions come with a hefty price tag. Missteps at this juncture can create obstacles for future financial security.



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Imperfect Decisions

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 80% of college students change their major at least 1 time³. This statistic is troubling because the average student takes 6 years to earn a 4-year degree. With record high tuition, that increases every year, the financial burden is compounded when student require more than 4 years.



At this level, decisions are high stakes and can dictate the trajectory of a student's life. There are a variety of reasons for students changing their major but the rate of occurrence points to a deeper issue and root cause. The post high school decision requires strategic thinking.



The Problem

Simply put students typically are not prepared to make such a strategic decision alone. Unfortunately, the timing of the decision does not match with the student's ability to make the decision. Students must decide at 18 but their brains are not fully developed until 25.

Of course, we are not saying that no student can make strategic decisions but according to the science around brain development most students are not prepared to make strategic decisions at 18. Also, some students have the benefit of parents and guardians who provide guidance, mentorship, and direction. In this case the student is led by someone that has paved the strategic thinking groundwork thus removing some of the pitfalls and blind spots.



Solution Approach

To recap there is a timing discrepancy between the post high school decision (18) and the brains capacity to make strategic decisions (25). One solution is to delay the post high school decision until the student is 25. This solution is unrealistic and will undoubtedly result in sub-optimal outcomes. It's clear that the decision must take place when the student is 18, 25 is too late.

By incorporating additional factors, a more accurate representation of the constraints and implications are presented. Below is an approach to reduce risk and improve outcomes:

1. The student creates a comprehensive career plan and seeks feedback from parents, guardians, advisors, and mentors
2. Parents, guardians, and advisors review the student's career plan and looks for connections within their network
3. The student seeks feedback from industry professionals
4. The student interviews and shadows an industry professional
5. The student conducts research on the role to determine if there is alignment between their skills and job responsibilities as well as course work
6. The student builds in-demand skills
7. Start the process as early as possible



References

1. <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/research-summaries/education-earnings.html>
2. <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college>