

Parental Influences on Post-Secondary Major Choice

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify how various levels of parental influence have an impact on the satisfaction, and commitment toward one's major choice in today's university and college students. This study examined 109 participants who were 18 years or older and current students or those who had recently completed post-secondary education. Through social media and word of mouth, a total of 20 males and 89 females responded to the survey. Focusing on the three parental influences of supporting, enforcing, and non-existent parenting, conclusions can be drawn on the level of satisfaction and commitment a student has towards their major choice. The findings of the survey demonstrate that having an influence, whether it is positive or negative has a slight positive influence on the commitment of a student's major. It was also found that when the parental influence is negative, the commitment may be high, as the student feels they have no other choice, and are committed out of necessity, rather than desire. Students feeling high levels of positive support in their decision-making process have higher positive levels of satisfaction with their choice of major during university or college. Future research is available through the following study in order to examine whether the parental influence on choice of major is connected and correlated to the individual's job search decision-making process.

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing importance and availability of post-secondary education options that youth in North America may choose from. This choice adolescents make has become more essential in the decision making process that youth go through. University enrolment rates have been increasing in Canada, and more Canadians are completing university now than they were a decade ago (University Completion, 2014) For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the choice of major at college or university rather than on an individual's career choice. The purpose of this study was to examine the level of commitment and satisfaction towards one's major, as an individual's choice of major is hard to quantifiably measure. The life stage of major exploration and decision making for today's post-secondary students is crucial, and their decision of which major to academically pursue is an important element of this stage. Modern youth are seeking alternate sources of supporting information pertaining to major choice than their predecessors. Technology has made information regarding the benefits and drawbacks of each major readily available and accessible at each school. This is provided so that students can understand as much about this decision as possible. When making decisions about what major to choose for college and what occupation to choose, adolescents most frequently use their paternal and maternal figures as a resource (Otto, 2000); this influence can be seen through three facets of parental influence in career decision making: supporting, enforcing, and non-existent, affecting the choices that young people make and the quality of those choices (Dietrich & Kracke, 2009)).

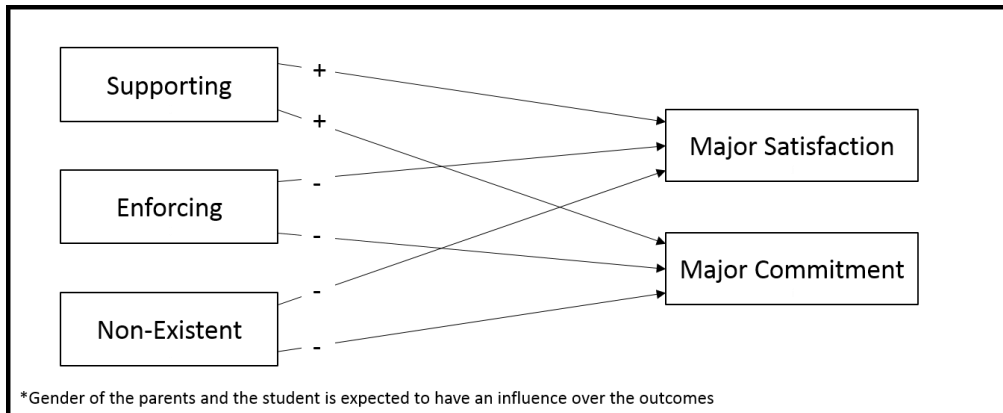
The trend that was once common of young individuals leaving the home for the first time in their later adolescent stages has changed in the last few decades mainly due to the expansion of the prevalence of post-secondary education and training, as well as the reduction in

opportunities for individuals to find work due to the continuously saturating labour market. Youth can find that the labour market is saturated with equally qualified entrants, leading them into accepting any employment as opposed to employment that matches their skill levels (OECD, 2010). The premise of the modern family has thus been altered as individuals may experience parental influences for longer periods by engaging in fewer transitions in younger life (Clark, 2014). There are interesting connections in this area of study that still have yet to be made. The study conducted intends to expand present understanding of how several different aspects of paternal and maternal figures influence adolescents attending high-school, and their decisions, into a general comprehension of how adolescents who just completed high-school are affected by these same varying influences. This influence will ultimately lead the students to a career decision.

The findings that are reached through the implementation of this study will be used to further understand how youth make major life decisions, what sources are sought out for more information regarding this decision and how paternal and maternal figures are influencing these decisions. These research findings are important for management and organizations in general, finding have shown that parents likely do not have an impact on the choices and decisions made by the students. If organizations were relying heavily on the influence of parents to sway their children to make decisions that would benefit the organization, such as choosing a major that would lead them to that organization, there is little evidence to suggest that this would be helpful.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Research Model:



The model that the research is based on creates the basis for the hypotheses. This model is based partly on the model designed by Dietrich and Kracke (2009), as their past research was used in the design process of this study. The three types of parental influences, supporting, enforcing and non-existent, are expected to have a relationship with the values of major satisfaction and commitment. As each type of parental influence is determined by different actions taken by the parents (or equal parental influence) it is expected that different relations between the parental influences and the commitment and satisfaction the individual feels towards the major will vary. There is also evidence that the gender of the student and parent may alter the levels to which students wish to engage with their parents in decision making, and the level to which the parent feels they should help with decision making (Otto, 2000).

Parental Influence:

When determining the level of parental influence on youth in today's generation, there are three levels of parental influence that specifically have an effect on the choice of major; and the commitment and satisfaction of this choice for adolescents. The three levels of focus of parental influence that this study is based on are supporting, enforcing, and non-existent. The supporting influential aspect concludes that an item such as encouragement in the exploration of choice of major, allows these adolescents to make their own choices (Dietrich and Kracke, 2009). Other actions could include, but are not limited to, unconditional support, along with providing information. Collaborating on decision-making as well as seeking advice from parents are other items to consider when identifying the level of support a parental influence exhibits.

When examining the aspect of interference, this covers actions that took away from the experience of making decisions for adolescents' major choice or exploration. Actions that could be included would be ones such as being pushed or nudged in a certain direction, being forced

into certain areas without much thinking about the adolescent, as well as criticizing someone's goals or ideas (Phillips, Christopher-Siks and Gravino, 2001).

There are many aspects that could cause parents' support to be non-existent with respect to adolescents' choices. Not having a lot of interest in helping with the process may be a cause along with little time or resources (Dietrich and Kracke, 2009). Some other factors could include that the adolescents merely do not want any help, and would rather make the decision independently.

Gender of Parental Influence:

When plans are being made with regards to major or career choice, generally speaking most youth, young men and women, turn to their mothers for help (Otto, 2000). Statistically, it is stated that mothers are the individuals who are most aware of their child's career interests and abilities, which is why most youth turn to their mothers for this advice (Otto, 2000). Although a lot of these studies are focused mainly on children, there is information noting that the mother's occupation was related more to the occupational interests of the children (Keller, and Whiston, 2004). Youth predominantly perceive that their parents, particularly their mothers, hold high educational expectations for them (Keller, and Whiston, 2004).

Major Choice:

Choice of major for adolescents entering university is a milestone in their lives. Generally speaking, once an individual decides on a major and is settled into it, these university students feel a certain degree of commitment to their major. There are certain measures attached to the focus on the level of commitment these students feel towards their major. The measures that are included, affective, normative, and continuance commitment stem from a previous study measuring organizational commitment, these levels of commitment will be applied to choice of major for the purpose of this study. Allen & Meyer, 1990). Affective commitment with regards

to attachment to one's job is associated with the involvement in the major, alongside the emotional attachment one has towards it (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Some university students who stay with their major have a higher affective commitment and stay with their major because they want to. Normative commitment to one's major is solely understood by the commitment students have based on the obligation they feel towards their major, where students stay because they feel like they should do so (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Major choice is often something that is hard to quantify, so in order to measure this idea, throughout this study, major commitment and satisfaction will be used in order to represent this construct. Satisfaction and commitment were commonly found measures associated with ones level of fulfilment achieved through a career choice with a new organization, these measures are applied to measure youths fulfilment achieved through their choice of major for the basis of this study.

The costs that are sometimes associated with leaving a major, whether that be choosing a new one, or changing courses around, portrays the commitment these students have to their major, and what would be a risk or cost for leaving their initial major. Hence, students with a higher level of continuance commitment stay with their major due to the associated costs that would result from switching such as added tuition costs, non-transferable credits and additional course requirements (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Satisfaction felt in terms of major selection was considered when the paternal/maternal influence is supportive, non-existent or enforcing, it is also connected to commitment in terms of what was expressed towards major choice. This relationship was used by Mowday, Porter and Speers (1974) with regards to the organization; however was repurposed to fit the premise of this study by having major choice used instead. The scales of job satisfaction that are exemplified in

this study are sufficient enough to encompass the feelings of satisfaction towards one's job. These scales have been proven useful in determining different aspects about work or school life, and the quality that one attributes to it (Brown, Charlwood and Spencer, 2012). A study in Economics of Education Review in 2007 "found that across all fields, new grads who were in jobs matching their majors earned more than those who were not" (Dietz, 2010). This demonstrates that undergraduate major choice is significantly correlated with factors that influence job stability and job satisfaction.

Gender of Student:

The gender (male, female, identify as other) of the post-secondary student will alter their perception of parental influence on choice of major, as well as the likelihood that the student used their paternal or maternal figure as a resource in their major decision (Otto, 2000). Research shows that both young women and men discuss the choice of major with their parental figures. However, young women report using this discussion resource more than young men have in the past (Otto, 2000). Whiston and Keller (2004) noted that female students' aspirations are based on the occupations and occupational levels of both the maternal and paternal figures, however male students' aspirations are solely dependent on the paternal figure's occupation. There is previous evidence that suggests younger male and female students produce a noticeable difference in how they gauge and perceive the level of influence parental figures output (Dietrich and Kracke, 2009). Therefore, this study will aid research looking to focus on parental influences affecting the older adolescent target market and further general understanding of the effects the varying parental influences levels have on the genders identified in the study through their survey participation.

Rationale:

This study intends to fill a current lacuna in research by providing further evidence as to how varying levels of parental influence affect adolescents who have recently graduated high school (less than 5 years) decisions when using their parents as a resource in comparing and selecting a major for their post-secondary education. As young people are using their parents as a major source for guidance and support (Otto, 2000), managers need to understand what this could mean for the future. Managers should consider this influence and how it can relate to other scenarios in the workplace, such as an individual's choice of job. Managers need to accept that parents hold a much more important role in their children's lives at a later age than it was in the past, as more adolescents are moving home after they complete college or university. This means adolescents who have completed their post-secondary education are influenced by their parents for a longer period of time.

The relationships that are defined through the research model and have been further explained through the application of current academic literature led the study towards the creation of the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses:

H1: Supporting parental influence will be positively correlated with both satisfaction and commitment with one's major

H2: Enforcing parental influence will be negatively correlated with satisfaction and commitment with one's major

H3: Non-existent parental influences will be negatively correlated with satisfaction and commitment to one's major

H4: Gender will be associated with relative influence of parental and maternal role models

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

The sample selected for this study was university and college students and recent graduates. For the purposes of gaining the optimum sample, participants that were 18 years of age or older were selected, and those who had been out of school for more than 5 years were not recruited. The total number of respondents for the questionnaire was 109 students, which consisted of 20 male respondents and 89 female respondents. In the end, 107 of these were used for further analysis, and the breakdown of these by major is shown below as two respondents did not answer all the questions. This discrepancy in the genders is likely due to the fact that most of the participants likely came from with the University of Guelph, which has a higher enrollment of female students over male students. As well females are more likely to participate in surveys in general (Smith, 2008). The participants were contacted through social media and more particularly, using outreach on the Facebook accounts of the researchers.

Breakdown of Respondents by Program of Study						
	Agriculture	Arts	Arts and Science	Commerce	Computing	Education
%	1.87	18.69	8.41	20.56	1.87	5.61
	Engineering	Mathematics	Medicine	Science	Veterinary	Other
%	4.67	2.80	2.80	12.15	0.93	19.63

Measures:

Parental Influences. The parental influence focused on three main types, supportive, non-existent and enforcing (Dietrich, Kracke, 2009). These influence levels allowed for the investigation into the participants' major choice, and how involved their parents were in the process leading up to the selection of a major for post-secondary education. These types of influences were measured using questions based on a 5-point Likert Scale. The Likert Scale

ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A sample question for supporting influence is “My parents talked to me about vocational interests: strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree nor agree, agree, strongly agree.” These types of questions were used throughout the survey to measure what type of influence parents had on the participants’ major selection. The non-existent and enforcing influence types were measured with the same Likert Scale and the questions were directed to allow for measurement of these types of influence.

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Commitment to Academic Major. The type of influence a parent had on a participant’s major choice would also affect the level of commitment the participant felt towards their major. Affective, normative, and continuance commitment levels were measured based on a set of questions designed by Allen and Meyer (1990). The questions used to measure commitment were modified versions of Allen and Meyer’s (1990) study of affective, normative and continuance commitment to an organization. For example, “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me” (Allen, Meyer, 1990) was used to measure affective commitment to the organization, while the modified question used in the survey read “This major has a great deal of personal meaning to me”, which allowed for the affective major commitment to be measured. The other questions for continuance and normative commitment were modified as well for the major commitment to be measured for this study.

Satisfaction with Academic Major. The level of satisfaction the participant felt in terms of their major selection was considered when the parental influence is supportive, non-existent or enforcing. Satisfaction is also connected to the level of commitment the participant felt towards their major. Mowday, Porter and Speers (1974) connected this to the organization, but for the purpose of this study major was used instead. Many factors were considered when measuring

satisfaction, a 5-point Likert Scale was used to gather data throughout the survey, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. For example, “Overall, I am satisfied with the workload in my major: strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree nor agree, agree, strongly agree.” How much influence parental figures had on the participants could affect how satisfied they are with the major selection, but certain aspects of the major could leave them feeling dissatisfied. These were measured to give an understanding of how parental influence, as well as the major would affect the level of satisfaction participants felt towards their choice of major.

Gender of Student and Gender of Parental Influences: The gender of the student and the relationships they hold with their parental influences, is expected to influence the level of support, enforcement, or non-existent influence the student feels. Dietrich and Kracke, 2009, found that male students typically report different levels of support than their female students. The relationships between students and their maternal or paternal influence will be measured, along with the overall attitude towards whether the parental figure was positive or negative. The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale for the relationship where Extremely Poor (1) was linked to a poor relationship and Excellent (5) was linked to a strong relationship. To measure whether the maternal or paternal figure was overall, negative or positive in their influence another 5-point Likert scale was used where Strongly Disagree (1) was one end and Strongly Agree (5) anchored the other.

RESULTS

To determine the validity of the hypotheses, a Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted and the correlations found between the variables can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations of Parental Influences to Commitment and Satisfaction

	Commitment	Satisfaction
Supporting	.121	.204*

Enforcing	.147	-.188
Non-Existent	-.082	-.179

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Supporting influences positively correlated with commitment and satisfaction

The study shows that supporting influences led to positive relationships with commitment and satisfaction, but the former was not a significant relationship. As represented in Table 1 there was a small but significant positive correlation between supporting and satisfaction with one's major ($r=.204, p<.05$) The correlation between supporting influences and commitment with ones major ($r=.121, p<.05$)

Gender differences resulted in no statistically significant differences in *t*-tests at either , as seen in Table 2, as females reported feeling supported an average of 3.96 out of a possible 5 and males reported an average of 3.78 out of a possible 5.

Enforcing influences negatively correlated with commitment and satisfaction

The data suggests that enforcing influences led to a positive correlation with commitment ($r=.147, p<.05$) and a negative correlation with satisfaction ($r=-.188, p<.05$), as represented in Table 1.

The results also showed that there are no significant gender differences in *t*-tests for enforcing influences as female respondents rated an average of 2.21 and male respondents an average of 2.23 out of a possible 5. These results are available in Table 2.

Non-Existent influences negatively correlation with commitment and satisfaction

The correlation between non-existent influences and commitment was found to be insignificant ($r=-.179, p<.05$) and the correlation between non-existent parental influence and satisfaction was also negative ($r=-.082, p<0.05$).

The results also showed that there are no significant gender differences in *t*-tests for non-existent influences at either the as females rated an average of 1.82 and males an average of 1.87 out of a possible 5 which is displayed in the data in Table 2.

Gender of Student and Gender of Parental Influence:

The mean ratings for maternal and paternal figures as positive and negative influences were calculated and are available in Table 3. Results showed that male students rated their maternal figure as a positive influence an average of 3.05 out of a possible 5, and female students rated their maternal figure as a positive influence an average of 3.45. This was not a statistically significant difference. The same results were found for paternal figures as males ranked them 3.33 and females 3.26. In terms of the paternal figure as a negative influence, male students ranked on average 2.28 and female students 1.83. All of these findings were not significantly different. The only statistically significant different finding at the $p < .05$ level was ratings for maternal influence as a negative influence, as male respondents reported on average 2.37 and female students reported 1.81.

TABLES

Table 2: Gender of Student, Parental Influences, Commitment and Satisfaction

	Male	Female
Supporting	3.78 _a	3.96 _a
Enforcing	2.23 _a	2.21 _a
Non-Existent	1.87 _a	1.82 _a
Commitment	3.05 _a	3.54 _b
Satisfaction	3.89 _a	3.86 _a

Note: Values in the same row and sub-table not sharing the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ in the two-sided test of equality for column means. Cells with no subscript are not included in the test. Tests assume equal variances

Table 3: Maternal and Paternal Influences and Gender of Student

	Male	Female
Maternal Figure as the most positive influence	3.05 _a	3.45 _a
Maternal Figure as the most negative influence	2.37 _a	1.81 _b
Overall relationship with maternal figure	4.37 _a	4.28 _a
Paternal Figure as the most positive influence	3.33 _a	3.26 _a
Paternal Figure as the most negative influence	2.28 _a	1.83 _a
Overall relationship with paternal figure	3.83 _a	3.87 _a

Note: Values in the same row and sub-table not sharing the same subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ in the two-sided test of equality for column means. Cells with no subscript are not included in the test. Tests assume equal variances

DISCUSSION

After examining the findings, it was determined many of the hypotheses were not supported based on the survey data. Although the expected findings did not hold true, many other interesting ideas came to light based on the results. These ideas and their implications, as well as possible reasons as to why this information is understandable and could have been predicted are discussed further.

Students feeling high levels of positive parental support in their decision-making process are significantly satisfied with their major choice, however data suggest that supporting parents do not influence an increased level of commitment. This finding may suggest that the parents may continue to support the students once they are in college or university, and that the students feel that if they were to change majors, they would still have the support of their parental influence - the support is not based on choice of major. This may be suggesting that supportive parents would support any major choice decision made by the student.

When it comes to the gender of the student, there are also some slight differences, however not enough that they significantly suggest that there are any distinct differences between the genders in this study. Female students reported slightly higher feelings of supporting parental influence than males, which is believed to be related to the disproportionate representation of female respondents in the survey. Although females' level of correlation are slightly higher, there is not a big enough difference to be overly significant in terms of satisfaction. Overall, students on average reported moderately high levels of support from their parents, but it did not differ from gender to gender.

It was found that enforcing influences have a positive relationship with commitment, as parents who enforced choices of major made by students - saw that the commitment to major increased, and levels of satisfaction with choice of major decreased; although neither of these relationships were considered statistically significant. This result strayed from the stated hypothesis, but is interesting as it suggests that when students are forced into a major by parental influences, they are more likely to feel restricted within their major, and feel as if they do not have a choice to change their major should they desire to do so, causing the student to feel trapped. It is understandable that satisfaction would have a negative relationship with enforcing influence, even though not significant, as it would be expected; if someone feels they are forced into a certain path or a decision that they would likely not display feelings of satisfaction with that choice.

In terms of gender differences, there were no significant differences in the levels to which male and female students reported feeling forced into a major. This is statistically important to note as it determines that regardless of whether you are male or female, you do not perceive high

levels of being enforced by your parents to choose a particular major; both genders reported low levels of enforcing influences.

The data suggest that when parents play no influential part in the decision making process for students entering a post-secondary institution the students have low levels of commitment and satisfaction to their major, although these relationships are not statistically significant. This was the only measure to result in both negative relationships, although it had statistically insignificant correlations with both satisfaction and commitment.

No significant gender differences were reported for non-existent influences, and the average to what students reported perceiving non-existent influences was quite low.

One of the most interesting correlations found from the study has to do with financial support and satisfaction as it was found that the relationship between these two variables were statistically significant. As parents' level of financial responsibility increases in order for the student to attend the post-secondary institute, the level of satisfaction with the major decreases. This finding can be compared to the relationship between financial support and the enforcing influence, which was also significant as levels of financial support increase, the level to which parents force a major on their students also increases. Here it can be seen that there is a slight indirect relationship between enforcing and the level of satisfaction.

Male students reported significantly more than female students that their maternal influence was the most negative impact on their major choice. This is suggestive that male students find that their paternal influence is more in line with their interests and may be more supporting or helpful in making decisions. It could also suggest that male students may not look to their maternal figures when making decisions for college or university, and may rely solely on the opinions of their paternal figures. Along with these findings, it is also worthwhile to note that

female students are less likely to admit that a parental influence, whether maternal or paternal, was a negative influence on their decision making. This can indicate that in general, female students perceive their parents were more helpful in their efforts, or that they found they were less intrusive in doing so.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There were some basic limitations connected to this research that the conductors of the survey had to endure in order to deliver the results. As time was limited, the length of time the questionnaire was open for participants to engage in the survey was shorter than what would ideally have been chosen. Along with this, the limited scope of the networks and connections of the researchers limited the location of participants to a generally small area, and within the Guelph, Ontario community. This can skew the results in favour of the general population in the area, rather than fully reflect the views of current students and recent graduates across the province or the country as the University of Guelph has a largely female based population (Intini, 2006).

To further this research and to get more information to help an organization in working with younger workers, it is suggested that information be collected on items such as whether this study could be replicated for adolescents in the workforce on their choice of job, and show similar or better results. Looking at how parental influences can affect the student's desire for certain aspects of a job such as remuneration, compensation packages and the job location, may indicate interesting trends. Looking at the parental influence not only in the selection of a major, but also the selection of where to go to school, may indicate some interesting trends as well. The

results here could show how close modern families are and how much influence they have on young people's decision making today.

Overall, research conducted has shown that despite earlier findings, parents likely play a small role or no part in a student's decision-making process with regards to a post-secondary major, and in turn their influence does not affect the perceived levels of commitment and satisfaction one feels towards their major. There is however some evidence to suggest that supportive parents can increase the level of satisfaction with major choice of the student, which may be beneficial for parents or other stakeholders in the decision-making process to consider. It is important to consider for both parents and students, the financial independence of the student. The research has suggested that those who are independent of their parents in their financing of school, may feel better about their choice of major.

In the end, the parental influence effect is very low, but there is still some room to conduct further research, perhaps in a larger scope to determine if the above effects hold true.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the research conducted did not support the hypotheses, and did not support earlier research done by Dietrich and Kracke (2009). There is very little evidence here to suggest that parental influences play a major role in the decision making process for students.

Supporting, enforcing and non-existent parental influences have very little bearing on the commitment and satisfaction today's students and recent graduates attribute to their choice of

major. It may be important though to note for parents that if they support their child's decision on a major, they may be able to promote higher satisfaction among their students with their choice. This level of satisfaction may be able to produce other outcomes, such as higher grades, or better employment opportunities, so this result should not be overlooked.

Parents and other parental influences, may play an important role in other aspects of the lives of their children, but the research presented above does not paint a clear picture to support the notion that they can highly influence the choice, satisfaction or commitment their child has towards their major. This is important for employers to note as playing into the needs and wants of parents, may not yield the desired results, as it is seen that parents play little to no role in influencing the commitment and satisfaction of their children. Young people in today's society should also be aware that by relying heavily on their parents in making decisions, may not help them to get to where they want to be, however by providing their parents with information on their choices, and trying to get their support, one may be able to increase their levels of commitment and satisfaction.

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