



The family's role in high school graduates' higher education decision-making

Nailya Askarova^{a1}, Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration under the President of the Russian Federation, Russian Federation, nailyaaskarova5@rambler.ru

Olga Shalamova^b, Pacific State University, Russian Federation, shalamova345@rambler.ru

Liia Voronova^c, Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, Russian Federation, voronova_li22@rambler.ru

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Abstract

The career path choices of school-leavers are influenced by various factors, but the role of family values in shaping these decisions remains understudied. This research addresses the gap by exploring the direct and indirect influence of family on the higher education decisions of Russian and Kazakh school-leavers. The primary objective was to investigate how family traditions and values impacted students' choice of major. Surveys were conducted with first-year university students and their parents from Russia and Kazakhstan to gather data. A total of 80 families participated, representing different educational backgrounds and geographical locations. The findings revealed that a significant majority of students made their major choices under the influence of their families, although parents often failed to recognize the pressure they exerted. The study highlights the critical role of family dynamics in career decisions, with implications for understanding the broader socio-cultural factors influencing student choices. The results provide valuable insights into the intergenerational transmission of career values and suggest directions for future research into family influence on educational trajectories.

Keywords: Decision making; higher education; influence of family family; family traditions; schoolchildren.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Nailya Askarova, Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration under the President of the Russian Federation, Russian Federation. E-mail address: nailyaaskarova5@rambler.ru

1. INTRODUCTION

The senior high school years are a pivotal time for students to consider their future career paths. While some students have long-known aspirations, others base their decisions on factors such as financial resources, location, available knowledge, competition, and other external influences. This highlights the critical need for guidance and counseling (Atangongo et al., 2024). University and major selection is influenced by multiple factors, including occupational prestige, expected salary, peer and teacher opinions, and personal preferences (Yates, 2025; Humayun et al., 2018).

However, the family plays a dominant role in shaping a student's higher education decisions (Wu et al., 2025; Aslan & Koçak, 2023). Parents often assert their preferences by suggesting particular majors or institutions, sometimes neglecting the child's desires or considering them minimally (Bezdarodko, 2015; Terentyeva et al., 2018). Conversely, a passive parental role may involve self-exclusion from the decision-making process, leaving the student to navigate these choices independently (Guan et al., 2015).

The family's influence on a child's career decisions is profound. While adolescents may seem to reject parental guidance, they often absorb their family's values and perspectives unconsciously (Simpson, 2003). Even in the absence of direct advice, the family instills its norms and behaviors, significantly impacting the child's career choices (Jungen, 2008). Consequently, parents should recognize that their children often internalize family values, which can result in both positive and negative influences on career decisions (Lankard, 1995).

1.1. Literature review

Scholars highlight several theories of career aspirations: the theory of Eli Ginzberg, the theory of Robert Havighurst, the theory of Ann Roe, and the theory of Linda Gottfredson. Eli Ginzberg suggested that career choice is a continuous process that occurs in a succession of three periods: fantasy choices (before age 11), tentative choices (between ages 11 and 17), and realistic choices (between ages 17 and young adulthood) (Jungen, 2008).

Robert Havighurst outlined six stages of choosing a professional future but claimed that parents influence only the first of them. This stage, defined as "identification with a worker," includes ages 5 to 10 and implies children are identified with a worker who is close to them as their father, mother, or another significant person (Jungen, 2008).

Ann Roe's theory is related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Jungen, 2008). She believed that any needs that were not satisfied in childhood would either be eliminated from the child's consciousness or become unconscious motivators. Roe argued that parenting styles represent a key child's career choice influencer. She included the following six parenting styles in her model: overprotection, overdemanding, emotional rejection, neglect of the child, casual acceptance, and loving acceptance. In line with this, Roe hypothesized that children who experienced the first three parenting styles are likely to be oriented toward working with people in the future, while the others would be oriented toward careers related to science and engineering (Xing & Rojewski, 2018).

The last of the four theories is the one coined by Linda Gottfredson, who stated that children's career choices are dependent on seven primary factors: gender, social class, background, intelligence, interests, competencies, and values. Gottfredson proposed four different stages of cognitive development, each of which implies rethinking previously chosen careers. Although the researcher did not indicate a direct parental influence on children's career choices, she did mention that a college student is more likely to have the knowledge needed for one parent's job rather than for any other profession (Wambu et al., 2017).

Researchers qualitatively assessing family influence on career decisions using questionnaires indicate that the career information provided by parents is most often consistent with established family traditions. In addition, children from families who own private businesses are often under considerable pressure in terms of future occupation choice as family members believe that it is economically beneficial for the younger

generation to continue the family practice. Concurrently, scholars note that it is not uncommon for a high school student to be pressured by the success of older siblings in a particular industry. This pressure can be both overt and unconscious (Chope, 2005; Wambu et al., 2017).

In general, academic papers on the topic confirm the importance of parental influence on students' career choices (Jungen, 2008). Quite interesting in this respect is the study that looked at factors affecting the career path preferences of adolescents from Pennsylvania, US. Using 12 focus groups, its author established that parents demonstrated their expectations by showing increased support for certain professions. Hence, the older generation encouraged enthusiasm for certain occupations and unconsciously shaped students' opinions about them (Ferry, 2006).

As Otto (2000) suggests, senior students often adopt their parents' norms and values, internalizing them as their own. Survey results indicate that 46% of adolescents share similar career aspirations with their parents, while 36% report having closely aligned views. Otto also notes that parents often express nonverbal reactions to their children's career interests. It is commonly believed that adults tend to underestimate their children's intuitive abilities while overestimating their self-control and self-awareness. While many parents try to remain neutral regarding their children's career choices, they often have underlying opinions that are difficult to conceal.

The strength of parental influence on graduates' decisions about their future career choices frequently depends on the relationship between family members (Qi et al., 2024). The matter here stands for the mutual parent-child affection as well as the quality of the day-to-day relationship. Adolescents who feel very attached to their parents are likely to be more anxious if adults disagree with their professional choice. On the other hand, if students feel emotionally distant from their parents, they are more likely to make more independent decisions about their future occupations (Chope, 2012).

Several studies on children's gender socialization have come to similar conclusions. They have found that a child's gender has much to do with parental expectations. For example, fathers and mothers expect different career choices from male and female children. In addition, it was uncovered that female adolescents are inclined to seek advice on career paths from their mothers, while fathers influence children of both genders. That is perceptions of gender roles, despite current trends, can significantly affect a child's major choice (Jiang et al., 2024; Falco et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2006; Jungen, 2008; Otto, 2000).

Investigation of the role of family traditions in China in choosing a vector for further development demonstrated the powerful influence of the Confucian concept of *xiao* (filial deference). Chinese students are more disposed toward considering their family members' expectations and obligations to them. In addition, it is believed in China that career choices should correspond to the social status of the family. Although parents may not directly indicate a particular profession, they will raise their children in such a way as to imbue them with all the necessary characteristics for a particular occupation (Rathunde et al., 2000; Saleem et al., 2014).

Another interesting study in the field links the concepts of family influence, academic satisfaction, self-efficacy, and happiness. In this fashion, researchers suggest that career choices will determine students' quality of life, and for people who spend most of their time at work, career choice is a factor directly affecting happiness. This matter was studied with the help of an ecological concept consisting of four systems: micro (individual passions and goals), meso (peer influence), eco (influence of relatives), and macro (influence of various ideologies) (Koçak et al., 2021).

1.2. Purpose of study

The question of future major choice principles has always been of interest to educational field representatives. Fundamentally, the decision to enroll in higher education can be affected by a variety of factors, from personal and subconscious goals and intentions to overt leverages such as the media, friends, and family. The vastness of the topic acts as the core reason for its not full exploration. Despite this, with each study conducted and every work published, experts are getting closer to uncovering the issue, adding new information to the already existing knowledge. The novelty of this research resides in the analysis of the data

obtained from the students of higher education institutions (this allowed revealing the principles and motives for choosing a particular major) as well as in the study of parents' opinions regarding the degree of their influence on this choice.

The ultimate goal of this work was to determine the influence of family traditions on the university major choice using the example of Russian and Kazakh school-leavers.

The tasks of this work were as follows:

- 1) survey first-year students of higher education institutions to identify their motivation in the choice of major;
- 2) survey students' parents to determine the extent of their influence on their children's choices.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

Exploration of the influence of family traditions on the decision of graduates about higher education was conducted by enrolling families from two countries: Russia and Kazakhstan. Overall, questionnaires were administered to 80 families from Russia as well as first-year university students of the [BLINDED] University, [BLINDED] University, and [BLINDED], who had different specialties and backgrounds.

The total number of male representatives in the group of Russian students was 42.5% (34 people) and the female – 57.5% (46 people). Among them, 12.5% studied natural sciences (10 people), 36.25% – technical sciences (29 people), 31.25% – social sciences (25 people) and 20% – humanities (16 people). Of this number, 57.5% of students were of small-town origin (46 people), and 42.5% – were of urban origin (34 people).

The gender distribution of students from Kazakhstan was 52.5% males (42 people) to 47.5% females (38 people). Kazakh respondents also majored in natural sciences (16.25%, 13 people), technical sciences (20%, 16 people), social sciences (33.75%, 27 people), and humanities (30%, 24 people). The share of city residents was 48.75% (39 people); the other 51.24% (41 people) were small-town dwellers (Table 1).

Table 1

Research sample characteristics

	Russia		Kazakhstan	
	%	Number of people	%	Number of people
Males	42.5	34	52.5	42
Females	57.5	46	47.5	38
Natural sciences	12.5	10	16.25	13
Technical sciences	36.25	29	20	16
Social sciences	31.25	25	33.75	27
Humanities	20	16	30	24
City dwellers	57.5	46	48.75	39
Small-town dwellers	42.5	34	51.24	41

2.2. Data collection tool

The influence of family traditions on school leavers' higher education decisions was explored through an online survey of students and their parents. With this end in view, research participants were given questionnaires consisting of ten and four questions for students and parents, respectively (Appendix).

2.3. Data analysis

The academic performance of students participating in the study was analyzed by finding the arithmetic mean of all scores received during the academic semester.

2.4. Ethical issues

All study participants were made aware of the research goal and objectives. Parents and students consented to the processing and analyzing of the data collected during the survey. Although personal (students' gender and background) and professional (students' majors) information was collected for completeness, it was in no way disclosed. Anonymity was ensured through unique identification numbers assigned to each family.

3. RESULTS

One of the most important tasks of the paper was to analyze students' responses to direct and indirect survey questions in order to determine their motivation in choosing a major. The analysis of students' answers showed that the family had a significant effect on the decision on higher education in both countries considered.

The collected survey data unveiled several interesting results. For matters of convenience, the responses of students from the two countries will be considered first, followed by the responses of parents (Table 2).

Table 2

Student survey outcomes

	Russia		Kazakhstan	
	%	Number of people	%	Number of people
1. Major	See the <i>Research Sample</i> section for details.			
2. My major matches the major of one of my family members	31.25	25	23.75	19
3. Family was where I first heard about my major	78.75	63	85	68
4. My family influenced my major choice	66.25	53	56.25	45
5. I like my major	55	44	63.75	51
6. The most important thing in my major choice was personal motives	31.25	25	27.5	22
7. My interests match the chosen major	62.5	50	55	36
8. I do not want to work within the chosen major in the future	48.75	39	52.5	42
9. My family supported my major choice	90	72	87.5	70
10. I would choose the same major even if I had unlimited resources	11.25	9	15	12

From the data above, the following findings emerge. First of all, it was found that 31.25% of Russian students (25 people) and 23.75% of Kazakh students (19 people) chose a major that coincides with that of at least one of their parents or a close relative (grandfather, grandmother, brother, sisters).

Furthermore, 78.75% of students from Russia (63 people) first heard about their chosen major in the family, while among Kazakh students, the same response was given by 85% of respondents (68 people). Other answers included mass media (mainly the Internet), schools, and some other sources, references to which were too few for them to be mentioned.

The question seeking to clarify who or what affected students' major choice unveiled that for more than half of students in both countries, the deciding factor was family (common decision, influence of one of the parents, or blind adherence to tradition). In the group of Russian students, this answer was given by 66.25% of respondents (53 people), while among Kazakh students – 56.25% (45 people). Among other reasons for applying to the specific major were occupational prestige, stability, personal interests, and possible salary level.

The fifth question, the purpose of which was to determine whether students like to study the major they chose, is of particular interest. Positive answers were given by 55% of Russian respondents (44 people) and 63.75% of Kazakh respondents (51 people). It is worth noting that among those 53 Russian and 45 Kazakh students who gave affirmative answers, 51% (27 people) and 60% (27 people) responded "Yes" to the fourth question as well.

No less promising appeared to be the question, the purpose of which was to identify the most important aspects of the chosen major. It should be noted here that the students whose career path was decided upon by their parents mostly gave standard answers (stability, high salary) or refrained from answering. Consequently, respondents who were able to choose a career path independently gave creative and conscious responses, like personal fulfillment, desire to help people, realization of childhood dreams, and striving to take their place in society.

The seventh question aimed to determine whether the chosen profession corresponded to students' interests. Unfortunately, both in Russia and Kazakhstan, the majority of students, i.e., 62.5% of Russians (50 people) and 55% of Kazakhs (36 people), provided negative responses. Many students specified that future career and personal hobbies are incompatible for them because of the low pay of the hobby or unwillingness to turn it into a job.

About half of the surveyed confirmed their unwillingness to work within the limits of the major they chose. Such a stance was supported by 48.75% of Russians (39 people) and 52.5% of Kazakh respondents (42 people). In the survey notes, some of them indicated that the reasons were a mismatch of expectations and reality, loss of interest, and initial unwillingness to work in the field.

To one of the most critical survey questions ("What was your family's reaction to your major choice?"), the survey answered almost unanimously. The decision was supported by the families in 90% of cases for Russian students (72 families) and 87.5% of cases for Kazakh students (70 families). Conspicuous is the fact that all individuals claiming about their parents' influence on their major decision answered positively to this question as well. Those who answered negatively gave reasons, most common among which were parents' dissatisfaction with the university, low salary at the future job, and the need to move to another city.

The last question ("Which major would you choose if you had unlimited resources?") allowed understanding what prompted students to opt for a specific occupation: status, prospects, salary, or personal interest. Replies to this question were most varied. More significant, however, is that only a small portion of the surveyed would not change their choice – only 11.25% of Russian students (9 respondents) would apply for admission to the same major even if they had unlimited resources. Students of Kazakh universities showed a slightly higher result, but still insignificant (15% or 12 people).

Figure 1

Family influence on students' major choice

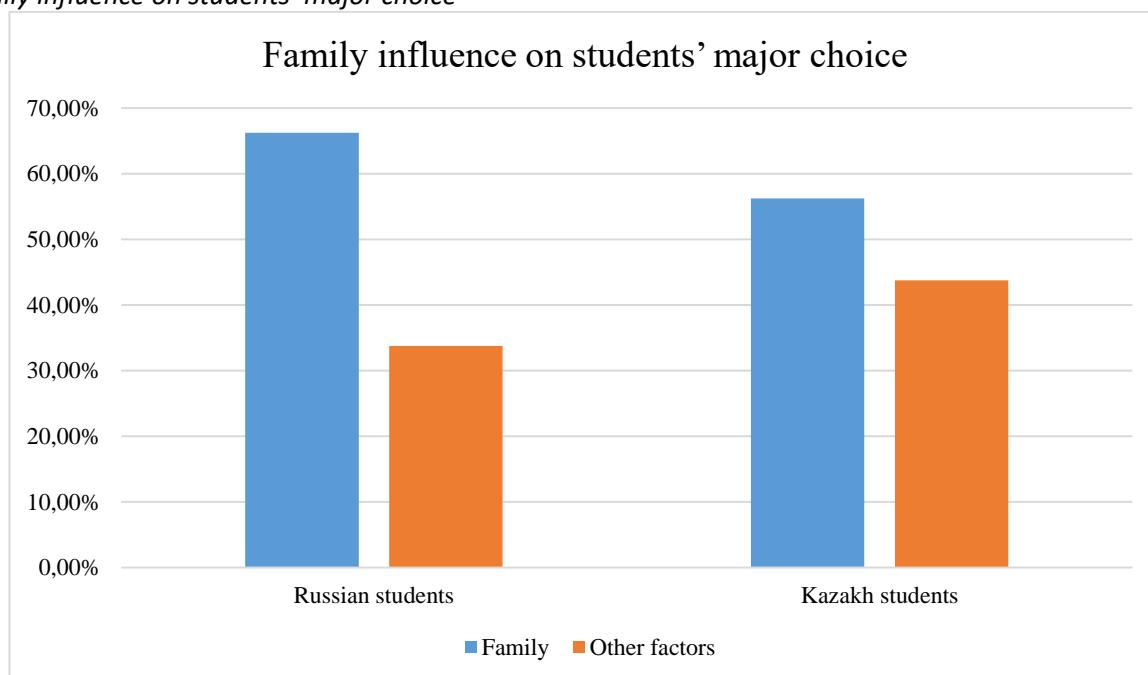


Figure 1 explicates the level of family influence on Russian and Kazakh students' major choices. Its data indicate that 66.25% of Russian students decided on their future major not independently but under the stimulus of their family members. At the same time, for Kazakhstan, this indicator is 56.25%. Although the level of family influence was different, the trend in the two countries coincided: more than half of the students did not plan their future career paths independently. More precisely, as many as 61.25% of first-years in Russia and Kazakhstan (on average) adopted a decision under the opinion of their families. So, the family was the main factor affecting their choice of major.

The next task of the present work was to study the answers of parents in order to identify the degree of their influence on children's choices as well as their general awareness of it. The answers given by parents are summarized in Table 3 for convenience.

Table 3

Parent survey outcomes

	Russia		Kazakhstan	
	%	Number of people	%	Number of people
1. It is important for you that your child continues the family tradition by pursuing the same profession	65	52	56.25	45
2. The most critical thing in choosing a major is the child's interests and aspirations	23.75	19	26.25	21
3. I would support my child if they chose an unpromising major	47.5	38	41.25	33
4. I have influenced my child's major choice	32.5	26	38.75	31

The parents' questionnaire consisted of four items. In response to the first question about the importance for the child to continue the family tradition in terms of occupation, 65% of Russian (52 families) and 56.25% of Kazakh (45 people) parents gave a positive response. The second question was more open and intended to find out what was most critical for parents in their child's major choice. The answers were varied, the most common being the family business continuation, building a secure future, developing natural and acquired talents, entering society with a prestigious major, and self-realization. Less than half of all parents surveyed replied positively to the question of whether they would support their child if they went for a non-promising profession that would bring them joy. Hence, 47.5% of parents of Russian students (38 families) and 41.25% of parents of Kazakh students (33 families) were ready to provide such support. The shares of affirmative responses to the last question ("Have you influenced your child's major choice?") constituted only 32.5% in the case of Russian (26 families) and 38.75% of Kazakh parents (31 families).

The collected data suggest that most often, parents fail to realize the extent of their influence on their children's future majors and, subsequently, careers. Despite the fact that many research participants believed that they had exerted no pressure or encouragement, the answers show the significance for them to have their family tradition continued.

The findings of this study indicate that the decisive factor in choosing a future career for students is, in one way or another, their family. Some respondents listened to direct advice or requests from relatives and enrolled themselves into a specific major solely following them. Others confirmed the indirect persuasions from family on career-related issues. The shares of students who chose their major on the recommendation of their parents were relatively high in both countries: for Russia, this indicator equaled 66.25%, while for Kazakhstan – 56.25%. From this, it follows that the trend in the two countries is the same, and the disposition of the family is of high weight when it comes to schoolchildren's decision to apply to a certain major.

4. DISCUSSION

The study collected a large amount of data for analysis. Surveys conducted among Russian and Kazakh students and their parents allow deducing the level of influence of family traditions on school leavers'

decisions regarding higher education. In more precise terms, it was established that the decision of more than half of the respondents from both countries (66.25% of Russian and 56.25% of Kazakh students) was affected by their parents. This outcome can be tracked in numerous studies on the topic. Many researchers obtain the same conclusions based on the survey of school students or analysis of their choice of educational institution and department (Jungen, 2008; Koçak et al., 2021; Pugacheva et al., 2020; Sturm, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2013).

It is worth noting that, for the most part, students' parents did not realize that they had anyhow affected their children's decision to enroll in a particular field. The presence of direct or indirect influence was admitted by 32.5% of families from Russia and 38.75% of families from Kazakhstan. This point is fully in line with the outcomes obtained by other specialists (Otto, 2000). Having conducted relevant surveys, they confirmed that parents often underestimate the quality and quantity of their influence on schoolchildren. Besides, many scholars (Chope, 2002; Guan et al., 2016; Weinshenker, 2006) state that the transmission of norms, values, and attitudes begins when the child is still in the early childhood stage. The imposition of one's opinion may be implicit and hidden in nonverbal means of communication or one-second reactions. Therefore, even the most unbiased parents may be reluctant to affect their child's career choice.

A study conducted at a university in North Carolina (USA) suggests that a variety of aspects such as family, school, society, and social and economic factors can manipulate one's career decision. But, still, researchers admit that family is the most powerful of them. Despite the fact that parents of students believe that they have a neutral position regarding the choice of their children's profession, additional research confirms the opposite. The older generation is highly authoritative when acting as an example for workers. The available findings demonstrate that children begin to identify themselves with their parent's occupation at an early age – as soon as they can pronounce the job title of their mother or father (Jungen, 2008).

The conclusions of this research also align well with judgments reported in a study examining the relationship between high school graduates' reasons for choosing a profession and their level of happiness (Koçak et al., 2021). Students' answers to the question "Which major would you choose if you had unlimited resources?" evidence that the vast majority of the surveyed would not opt for the field they study if they had boundless opportunities at their disposal. In addition, only half (44% of students in Russia and 51% of students in Kazakhstan) of all the first-years enrolled liked studying the subjects of their major. Quite interesting is the fact that of those whose choice was influenced by parents or other relatives, the percentage of those satisfied with the learning process constituted 51% and 60%, respectively.

Analyzing these arguments, one can infer that making an independent decision on the choice of a future major directly affects academic performance. That is, students will be more successful in their studies if they choose a university and a department independently. By pursuing their interests and going after their dreams, learners have a better chance of graduating from a higher education institution with splendid knowledge and becoming professionals in their field.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of extensive data, including average student scores and survey responses of first-years and their parents, enabled the conclusion that school leaver's decision on a future major can be affected by many factors. However, the most powerful of them is family opinion. It can manifest itself explicitly when parents point to a particular major directly or unconsciously when family members non-verbally respond to the child's passion for a particular occupation.

The main purpose of the paper was to examine the influence of parental opinions on school leavers' decisions on higher education. Students' responses to specially coined survey questions made it clear that in the predominance of cases, their major choices were, in one way or another, conditional on their families' views. Interestingly, the parents of these students were largely unaware of the influence they had on their children.

Apart from this, the current paper analyzed the relationship between major choice independence and educational achievement. Comparing students' average academic scores and responses to the questionnaire

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made it clear that those under less pressure from families did better in their studies. This suggests that independent career choice presupposes better learning, boosted interest in education, and finally, a more successful career.

The scientific value of this research resides in the possibility of using the data obtained in the survey and the conclusions drawn. The practical usefulness of the work lies in the possibility of revising and improving child-parent relationships on the basis of the findings provided.

Even though the sample of students was random and included representatives of different genders, majors, and backgrounds, and the questionnaire items compiled specifically for the study were as straightforward as possible, the work still has some limitations. They are mainly related to the individual psychological characteristics of students and their parents, which cannot be taken into account in this research, e.g., latent motives of learning activities or awareness of respondents. Parents may not remember influencing a student's choice of future major. Likewise, students may not perceive some behaviors or actions as influencing their choices, considering them their own.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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APPENDIX

Online questionnaires addressed to students and parents to identify the influence of family traditions on major choice decisions.

Student Questionnaire:

1. What is your major?
2. How many members of your family have the same major?
3. Where did you first hear about this major?
4. Who (what) influenced your decision to pursue this major?
5. Do you enjoy studying this major?
6. What is most important to you about this major?
7. Do your interests match the major you chose?
8. Would you like to work within the chosen major in the future?
9. What was your family's reaction to your major choice?
10. Which major would you choose if you had unlimited resources?

Parent Questionnaire:

1. Is it important to you that your child continues the family tradition by pursuing the same profession?
2. What do you think is most critical in choosing a major? (University prestige, child's hobbies, occupational prestige, future salary level, etc.)
3. Would you support your child if they chose an unpromising major that would, however, bring them joy?
4. Have you influenced your child's major choice?