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Jerry Sheehan Davis

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## Junior High School Students' Interest in "Early Awareness" Program Activities

by Jerry Sheehan  
Davis

*This article describes the results of a survey of student interest in career and postsecondary education planning. The survey reveals that junior high school students' willingness to participate in planning activities and their willingness to sacrifice to achieve postsecondary goals are directly related to their plans for life after high school. "Early awareness" activities are unlikely to be well-received by a significant proportion of the young students.*

In recognition that student preparation for postsecondary education begins long before the eleventh and twelfth grades and that rising costs require parents to begin planning to meet those expenses long before they are incurred, many educators have developed and implemented career and educational guidance and information programs for junior high school students and their parents. State departments of education, state and federal financial aid programs, college admissions and financial aid administrators and their associations, guidance counselors and their associations, and others have begun to focus attention on programs and practices that will encourage young students to better prepare for life after high school. These activities frequently are discussed under the rubric of "early awareness" programs (NASFAA, 1988).

Advocates of such programs believe they will help students learn more about available educational and career opportunities and help them better prepare for these opportunities. It is believed that "early awareness" will increase postsecondary education participation rates among high school graduates as well as make it easier for them and their families to plan for the costs of education.

All "early awareness" projects are faced with two basic problems. Students cannot be expected to acquire knowledge of career options, educational opportunities, and available financial aid unless and until they are willing to pay attention to such matters. Junior high school guidance counselors and teachers have learned from experience that many young students simply are not interested in these subjects. So the first problem is one of motivating students to pay attention. Put another way, projects have to determine which students are willing to participate in various kinds of postsecondary planning activities and then make those activities available to the students.

The second problem concerns the content of what is to be learned by participating in different planning activities. Junior high school students cannot be expected to learn and retain much cognitive information about careers, colleges, or admissions and financial aid practices at a time which is three to five years before it will be applied. Moreover, what is true and might be learned by a seventh grader will not necessarily be true and useful by the twelfth grade.

Jerry Sheehan Davis is director of research and policy analysis for the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency.

In a successful "early awareness" project, junior high school students can be expected to develop greater awareness of and interest in career and educational opportunities and the need to better plan for them. "Early awareness" projects can achieve educational objectives that fall in the "Affective Domain" of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Krathwohl, *et al.*, 1964.) They can enhance student willingness to *Receive* information on postsecondary opportunities and to *Respond* to it. They can also achieve *Valuing* objectives which concern such things as *Acceptance* of the value of certain postsecondary activities, *Preference* for the value of planning for and participating in them, and *Commitment* toward achieving postsecondary goals.

When "early awareness" project staff plan activities to achieve "Affective Domain" goals, it is important that they know how their students value or perceive postsecondary opportunities and which planning activities different students are willing to pursue. Which activities will students readily *Receive*? To what kinds of activities and learning experiences will students readily *Respond*?

A survey form to assess these matters was designed and administered to student participants in an "early awareness" project in Pennsylvania, the Project for an Informed Choice, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU, 1988). This article describes the results of the survey and represents a synopsis of a more lengthy report on that research (Davis, 1988). It is believed that the survey findings will help other "early awareness" project staff to better understand what can be achieved to better design successful programs.

#### **The Survey Document**

The Student Survey of Interest In Career and Education Planning Activities was administered to 935 seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth graders in six Project schools in the Spring term, 1988. These students' personal and family characteristics and their postsecondary plans are statistically representative of those of Pennsylvania's junior high school population. Unless Pennsylvania's high school students are unlike students in the rest of the nation, the attitudes and values discovered in this research are likely to be present among junior high school students elsewhere. If this is the case, and it is more likely that it is than it is not, the results of the Survey have important implications for all "early awareness" programs.

The Survey is comprised of three parts. The first part describes 25 activities and asks if students would like to do them, would neither like or dislike doing them but would do them, would dislike and not do them, or are uncertain whether they would like or dislike doing them. These activities primarily are concerned with assessing *Receiving* and *Responding* objectives.

The second part of the Survey lists ten activities primarily concerned with assessing *Valuing* objectives and asks students to indicate if they would be willing to do them, would not be willing but would do them anyway, would not do them, or were uncertain where they would or would not do them. The third part of the Survey

**TABLE 1**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Would Like To Do</b>	<b>Indifferent Would Do</b>	<b>Dislike Not Do</b>	<b>Not Certain</b>	<b>Average Score</b>
Talk with parents about career plans .....	62.0%	21.5%	9.6%	6.9%	2.36
Talk with classmates about career plans .....	59.9	23.1	10.5	6.5	2.34
Talk with parents about PSE plans .....	59.4	22.6	11.2	6.8	2.31
Talk to a student in PSE about school .....	60.4	21.2	10.4	8.0	2.29
Watch a TV program about an occupation .....	57.6	23.0	11.3	8.1	2.27
Use a computer-based guidance program .....	56.4	22.6	12.3	8.7	2.23
Attend a school college night program .....	55.0	24.3	10.8	9.9	2.21
Talk with classmates about PSE plans .....	51.6	27.2	12.5	8.7	2.19
Talk with school staff about curricula .....	52.6	24.6	14.0	8.8	2.17
Visit a school to talk about going there .....	51.6	23.3	13.4	11.7	2.12
Seek career advice from teachers/counselors .....	46.0	27.8	16.0	10.2	2.08
Write to schools about their programs .....	46.8	27.2	14.8	11.2	2.06
Help a friend learn about careers/PSE .....	44.3	32.7	12.1	10.9	2.06
Attend a school career day program .....	43.4	30.5	16.7	9.4	2.06
Listen to a talk on available financial aid .....	43.8	28.8	17.6	9.8	2.03
Listen to a talk on admissions processes .....	41.6	32.8	15.4	10.2	2.01
Listen to adults discuss their careers .....	41.6	30.1	17.4	10.9	2.00
Visit workplaces to talk to employees .....	33.9	38.1	17.9	10.1	1.94
Look through reference books on colleges .....	36.8	30.1	21.3	11.8	1.88
Read an article about an occupation .....	32.9	33.4	23.0	10.7	1.87
Look up career information in the library .....	33.3	30.2	23.8	12.7	1.80
Look up financial aid data in the library .....	28.4	34.2	22.7	14.7	1.72
Read biographical works on occupations .....	28.0	26.8	33.6	11.6	1.70
Listen to a lecture on decision-making .....	23.3	31.6	32.6	12.5	1.62
Write an essay on a preferred career .....	13.0	22.1	53.5	11.4	1.34
Mean Percentage/Score .....	44.1%	27.6%	18.2%	10.1%	2.03
Standard Deviation .....	13.0	4.7	9.8	2.0	0.25

**Percentages of All Students Expressing Preferences for Postsecondary Planning Activities**

collects data on the students' genders, racial-ethnic groups, academic grades, postsecondary plans (attending college or a trade school, getting a job, joining the military, etc.), parental educational levels, and perceptions of their parents' plans for their postsecondary activities. The data from the third part of the Survey were used to cross-tabulate responses to the other items.

**Students' Preference  
For Postsecondary  
Planning Activities**

Table 1 displays the students' responses to 25 planning activities described on the Survey. On the average, only 44.1 percent of the students said they would like to do the activities. Another 27.6 percent said they were indifferent but would do them. About 18.2 percent said they would dislike and not do the activities and 10.1 percent were uncertain.

There were about four activities that as many as six out of ten students said they would like to do. They include: (1) talk with their parents about their career plans, (2) talk with their friends or classmates about jobs they would like to have after completing their education, (3) talk to a student who has attended a college or school that interests them, and (4) talk with their parents about their plans for postsecondary education.

There were eight activities that the students generally would *not* want to do. They were, in order of least liked to more liked: (1) write an essay about an occupation they would like to have, why they want it, and how they plan to get it; (2) listen to a lecture on how they can make better decisions about what to do after high school; (3) read a biography about someone who has an occupation that interests them; (4) visit the guidance office or a library to look up information on financial aid; (5) go to the library to look up information about occupations that might interest them; (6) read a newspaper or magazine article about an occupation that interests them; (7) look through reference books on colleges to find out more about ones they might attend; and (8) visit workplaces to learn more about what people who work there do on their jobs.

Activities which involve talking with parents, family members, and friends or classmates were most often preferred. Watching television programs or films and using computers to learn more were next most often preferred activities. Talking with school staff and faculty were preferred activities of only half the students, as was visiting a school or college to talk to its representatives. Activities that involve reading and/or writing were least often preferred.

Although many educators believe students need training in making more realistic decisions, the students generally do not share this viewpoint. Only one-fourth of the students said they would like to listen to a lecture on decision-making and nearly one-third said they would not like to do this. Another one-third was indifferent but willing.

A majority of the students expressed a preference for discussing their career or education plans with their parents. But data from another Project survey indicate that they seldom do this. About 11 percent of the Project students said they had never discussed their postsecondary plan with their parents, 16 percent said they had done this only once or twice and another 34 percent said they had done this three or four times. Only 39 percent said they had regular monthly discussions and just 18 percent of this group said these discussions occurred more than twice a month.

That a majority of the students said they would like to discuss their postsecondary plans with their friends or classmates suggests

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*"Although many educators believe students need training in making more realistic decisions, the students generally do not share this viewpoint."*

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that peer counseling strategies might be practical for some students in some schools. That students would like and/or were willing to talk to postsecondary students about their experiences suggests that invitations to high school alumni now enrolled in college to become "guest lecturers" might be a practical means of getting information to students.

Student interest in use of computer-based guidance programs and films or television programs suggests that more widespread use of these technologies would be efficacious.

The average scores reported in the last column of Table 1 were obtained by multiplying the number of students who said they would like to do the activity by "3," multiplying the number who would be indifferent by "2," multiplying the number who would dislike the activity by "1," multiplying the number who were uncertain by "0," summing these totals, and then dividing by the total number of students. Unless the difference in two average scores is greater than 0.08 points, the difference in preference levels is *not* statistically significant at the .05 level of significance.

It was hypothesized that the students' willingness to participate in various planning activities would vary with differences in their characteristics, backgrounds, and plans. To some extent these variations appeared in the analysis. Females generally were more likely than males, and Black students more likely than other students, to express a willingness to do the activities. Students' "preference scores" on the items generally increased as their academic grades increased. Students whose fathers had high school diplomas generally had higher scores than those whose fathers had not completed high school. Students whose fathers had participated in postsecondary education had even higher scores. But having fathers with still higher levels of postsecondary education had no statistically significant effects on students' "preference scores."

It was hypothesized that as students advanced from the seventh grade to the tenth grade they would exhibit greater willingness to participate in the planning activities. But because the compositions of the samples of students at each of the four grade levels were so different, it was impossible to produce any valid tests of this hypothesis. These data revealed no appreciable changes in preference scores by student grade levels when student postsecondary plans were held constant.

The students' willingness to participate in the various planning activities was most closely and directly related to what they planned to do after high school. Their postsecondary plans had a much stronger relationship to their "preference scores" than did any other variables, such as gender, ethnicity, and parents' educational background.

Table 2 shows the students' "preference scores" on each of the 25 planning activities by their postsecondary plans. Average scores of 2.25 or better indicate considerable interest. A score of less than 2.0 indicates that students generally were not interested in pursuing the activity.



**TABLE 2**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>4-Year College</b>	<b>Other PSE</b>	<b>Vocation Bound</b>	<b>Undecided Students</b>
Talk with parents about career plans .....	2.55	2.36*	2.18	2.19
Talk with classmates about career plans .....	2.44	2.34	2.30**	2.10
Talk with parents about PSE plans .....	2.68	2.38*	1.88	1.95
Talk to a student in PSE about school .....	2.56	2.39*	1.99	2.05
Watch a TV program about an occupation .....	2.42	2.23	2.27	2.12
Use a computer-based guidance program .....	2.39	2.26	2.15	2.10
Attend a school college night program .....	2.54	2.30*	1.93	1.73
Talk with classmates about PSE plans .....	2.46	2.19*	1.97	1.90
Talk with school staff about curricula .....	2.48	2.07*	1.88	1.99
Visit a school to talk about going there .....	2.37	2.34*	1.68	1.78
Seek career advice from teachers/counselors .....	2.27	2.09	1.92	1.90
Write to schools about their programs .....	2.47	2.11*	1.68	1.65
Help a friend learn about careers/PSE .....	2.19	2.12	2.01	1.88
Attend a school career day program .....	2.23	2.10*	1.90	1.86
Listen to a talk on available financial aid .....	2.33	2.10*	1.71	1.73
Listen to a talk on admissions processes .....	2.29	2.09*	1.71	1.73
Listen to adults discuss their careers .....	2.18	2.02	1.93**	1.68
Visit workplaces to talk to employees .....	1.96	2.03	1.90	1.86
Look through reference books on colleges .....	2.22	2.01*	1.56	1.42
Read an article about an occupation .....	1.98	1.78	1.87	1.72
Look up career information in the library .....	1.97	1.85*	1.64	1.59
Look up financial aid data in the library .....	2.06	1.75*	1.53	1.35
Read biographical works on occupations .....	1.88	1.71	1.59**	1.38
Listen to a lecture on decision-making .....	1.69	1.69	1.67**	1.45
Write an essay on a preferred career .....	1.43	1.30	1.26	1.29
Mean Score .....	2.24	2.06*	1.85**	1.78
Standard Deviation .....	0.29	0.26	0.25	0.26

*NOTE: Scores in italics in the first column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the second column, at the .05 level. Asterisked (\*) scores in the second column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the third column. Asterisked (\*\*) scores in the third column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the fourth column*

**Students' Average Preference Scores on Planning Activities, by Postsecondary Plans**

The students who were four-year college-bound expressed considerable willingness to pursue sixteen of the activities. Students who planned to attend less-than-four-year schools expressed considerable willingness to pursue only eight of the activities. The vocation-bound students expressed considerable interest in just two activities, talking with classmates about their career plans and watching a television or video program about some occupation that interested them. Undecided students generally were disinterested in pursuing most activities but expressed some willingness to pursue five of them: talking with parents about their career plans, talking with classmates about their career plans, talking to a college student about his experiences, watching a television or video program about an occupation, and using a computer-based guidance program.

These data indicate that junior high school students who are planning to attend four-year colleges generally would respond to activities that traditionally have been offered to eleventh and twelfth graders. These include such things as attending "college nights," talking with teachers or guidance counselors about coursework and curricula needed to achieve education and career objectives, seeking career advice from teachers and counselors, writing to colleges for information about their programs and admissions requirements, listening to talks on admissions processes and financial aid requirements, and looking through reference books on colleges. However, only one of these activities, attending school-sponsored "college

**TABLE 3**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Willing To Do It</b>	<b>Unwilling But Do It</b>	<b>Would Not Do</b>	<b>Not Certain</b>	<b>Average Scores</b>
Work a job to save money for PSE .....	69.0%	11.5%	11.0%	8.5%	2.34
Decide to go on to PSE against friends' wishes .....	68.1	10.9	8.9	12.1	2.29
Get good grades against friends' approval .....	58.5	21.2	10.7	9.6	2.22
Increase time spent on coursework to improve grades .....	44.2	35.8	12.0	8.0	2.11
Take disliked subjects when it helps achieve goals .....	48.6	28.0	13.5	9.9	2.09
Go on to PSE against my parents' approval .....	49.8	14.7	16.3	19.2	1.90
Delay consumer purchases to save for PSE .....	21.3	29.4	33.3	16.0	1.51
Decrease leisure activity time to study more .....	17.1	29.4	41.1	12.4	1.47
Pursue some vocation against my parents' approval .....	29.7	10.6	40.4	19.3	1.46
Decrease time on extracurricular activities to study .....	14.9	24.4	47.1	13.6	1.37
Mean Percentage/Score .....	42.1%	21.6%	23.4%	12.9%	1.87
Standard Deviation .....	20.3	9.2	15.1	4.2	0.39

**Percentages of All Students Expressing Willingness to Participate in Value Activities**



**Student Values of  
Postsecondary  
Activities**

night" events, was of considerable interest to students who planned to attend less-than-four-year institutions. Furthermore, *none* of these traditional activities was of significant interest to vocation-bound or undecided students.

Learning theory (and common sense) suggests that students must value the subjects they are asked to study and/or the expected results of their study to be willing to pursue some learning activity. The Survey assessed the degree to which students value postsecondary experiences by determining their willingness to make personal sacrifices and expend effort to achieve their goals. Table 3 displays their responses.

There were only three activities that more than half the students said they were willing to do: (1) work to save money for postsecondary education; (2) decide to continue their education even if their friends opposed this decision; and (3) try to get good grades even if it might cause their friends to be upset with them or make fun of them.

Very few students said they would *willingly* delay consumer purchases to save for postsecondary education, decrease their leisure activity time to devote more time to studying, decrease time spent on school extracurricular activities to study, or pursue some vocation against their parents' disapproval.

In spite of the general lack of willingness to pursue most of the "Value" activities, there were five activities whose average scores indicate the students would at least do them. They include: deciding to try to earn good grades or go on to postsecondary education at the risk of their friends' disapproval, increase time spent on coursework to improve their grades, take disliked subjects to achieve their goals, and work at an after school or summer job to save money for postsecondary education.

It was noteworthy that students generally would devote more time to coursework to maintain or strengthen their grades but would not give up leisure time or extracurricular activities to accomplish this objective. Also, eight out of ten said they would work to save money for postsecondary education but only five out of ten said they would delay buying things they wanted to save for education. Only two out of ten said they would *willingly* delay consumer purchases.

One of the most important findings of the study was that students who expressed a high degree of willingness to participate in planning activities generally expressed a high degree of willingness to make sacrifices for postsecondary education. However, many students expressed willingness to participate in the 25 planning activities even when their "value scores" suggested much less willingness to make sacrifices to achieve their postsecondary goals. This suggests that it will not be necessary for Project staff to enhance the value students give to postsecondary activities to get them to participate in planning activities.

Student willingness to make sacrifices to achieve postsecondary goals varied by their characteristics in much the same ways their

**TABLE 4**

Activities	4-Year College	Other PSE	Vocation Bound	Undecided Students
Work a job to save money for PSE .....	2.55	2.50*	2.12	2.10
Decide to go on to PSE against friends' wishes .....	2.78	2.34*	1.67	1.88
Get good grades against friends' approval .....	2.54	2.09	2.04	2.05
Increase time spent on coursework to improve grades.....	2.32	2.09	2.02	1.98
Take disliked subjects when it helps achieve goals.....	2.44	2.07*	1.69	1.83
Go on to PSE against my parents' approval.....	2.26	2.00*	1.42	1.53
Delay consumer purchases to save for PSE .....	1.79	1.47*	1.26	1.29
Decrease leisure activity time to study more .....	1.68	1.40	1.37	1.29
Pursue some vocation against my parents' approval.....	1.23	1.48	2.06**	1.41
Decrease time on extracurricular activities to study .....	1.47	1.34	1.39	1.22
Mean Score.....	2.11	1.88*	1.70	1.66
Standard Deviation.....	0.52	0.42	0.33	0.35

*Note: Scores in italics in the first column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the second column, at the .05 level. Asterisk (\*) scores in the second column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the third column. Asterisked (\*\*) scores in the third column are statistically significantly larger than scores in the fourth column.*

**Students' Average Value Scores, by Postsecondary Plans**

willingness to participate in planning activities varied. Females had higher "value scores" than males, Black students had higher scores than other students, scores increased as students' grades increased, and scores generally increased as the levels of education achieved by students' fathers increased. But the students' postsecondary plans had the strongest relationship to their "value scores." Four-year college-bound students had higher "value scores" than other education-bound students who, in turn, had higher scores than vocation-bound or undecided students. Table 4 displays the data.

The four-year college-bound students' scores were *higher* than those of the other education-bound students for all but two activities. Both groups were *equally unwilling* to decrease time spent on extracurricular activities to devote more time to study and the four-year college-bound students were *less willing* to pursue some vocation after high school against their parents' disapproval.

The other education-bound students were more willing than the vocation-bound and undecided students to work to save money for their postsecondary education, to decide to go on to school against their friends' wishes, to take disliked subjects to achieve their goals, to go on to school against their parents' disapproval, and to delay consumer purchases to save for education. They were *less willing*

than vocation-bound students to pursue some vocation after high school against their parents' disapproval.

The "value scores" of vocation-bound and undecided students generally were not significantly different. The only significant difference was that vocation-bound students were more likely than undecided (and educational-bound) students to say they would pursue some vocation against their parents' disapproval. In terms of the values they placed on the individual activities, the vocation-bound and undecided students were very similar. These students' "preference scores" on planning activities were also very similar (see Table 2).

## Discussion and Conclusions

The Survey results suggest that "early awareness" activities are unlikely to be well-received by a significant proportion of junior high school students. However, junior high school students who already consider themselves education-bound, particularly those planning to attend four-year colleges, generally are willing to participate in many activities that should help them to begin preparation for post-secondary education long before the eleventh or twelfth grades. Therefore, "early awareness" programs can provide valuable information and activities that will reinforce student plans at a time when crucial decisions are made, e.g., choosing the best program of studies or making early decisions about saving to meet college expenses. The data indicate that traditional activities made available to eleventh and twelfth graders can effectively be offered to junior high school students who are education-bound.

The data suggest that targeting activities on young students with the intention to encourage more vocation-bound or undecided students to participate in postsecondary education is unlikely to produce much success, because these students display low levels of interest in participating in typical activities that are featured in many "early awareness" programs and because their values of post-secondary activities are at relatively low levels. Vocation-bound and undecided students generally are unwilling to read materials on colleges, college costs and financial aid, or careers; are reluctant to seek information and advice from counselors and teachers; and are unwilling to participate in school-sponsored events such as "college nights" or "career days."

The thousands of dollars state and federal agencies spend to deliver printed materials to junior high school students *who are not already college-bound* very likely represent an inefficient use of public funds to enhance postsecondary education participation rates. The money would more effectively be spent on dissemination of information through computer-based guidance programs and video cassette media.

Research on these and other junior high school students shows that their postsecondary plans are directly related to their perceptions of what their parents want them to do after high school (PACU, 1984). For example, 85 percent of these Project students whose parents wanted them to continue their education said they planned to do so. Only 24 percent of the vocation-bound and undecided

Project students had parents who wanted them to continue their education and 49 percent had parents with permissive, indifferent, or unknown attitudes.

Unless "early awareness" projects target activities on the younger students' parents as well as the students themselves, it is unlikely that the projects will shift many students from a "vocation-bound" or "undecided" category to an "educating-bound" category. Although it is difficult to develop programs which involve parents in the postsecondary planning activities of their children, the Survey results indicate students are quite willing to discuss their plans with their parents. Therefore, it appears that "early awareness" projects that provide information to parents, and the motivation to use it in discussions with their children, are likely to be more successful at increasing students' postsecondary education participation rates than are projects that work only with junior high school students through activities traditionally employed with senior high school students.

It is hoped that "early awareness" projects will continue to expand and that project staff will continue to try innovative methods of helping students to better plan for life after high school. The results of this Survey, it is believed, will help direct project staff toward more effective activities, that is, ones in which more students are willing to participate and ones that recognize and utilize parents in the learning process. ♦

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