

Vocational Aspirations of Rural Adolescents

Adolescents make a number of career-related decisions that influence their lives well into adulthood. Rural youth face a particular challenge when making such decisions. In choosing an adult occupation, many rural youth face the decision to remain in their home communities with limited employment opportunities or to leave the rural community to find higher paying technical and professional positions. Little information is currently available for rural schools to assist today's youth in transition to adult employment. As part of the Rural High School Aspirations Study, researchers initiated a series of studies to better understand (1) the vocational aspirations of rural youth, and (2) the alignment of vocational and educational aspirations.

Key Findings

As part of this study, rural students were asked if they planned to have a career by age 30. If so, they were asked what job or occupation they would most like to have. Survey results indicated that 90% of the students planned to work or to have a career by age 30. Students' open-ended responses were coded into 22 occupational categories. The most frequently reported categories were Healthcare (24%), Art/Entertainment/Sports/Media (12%), Science and Engineering (8%), Education (7%), Skilled Labor (7%), Service (6%), Technical (6%), and Protective Service (4%). Students' vocational aspirations were additionally coded according to the minimum level of education required to perform the occupation. Thirty-four percent the students' vocational choices required a high school education or some college, whereas 38% of the occupations required a college degree. Regarding alignment with educational aspirations, 39% of students aspired to appropriate levels of education needed to fulfill their vocational aspirations. However, 46% of the students aspired to more education than was necessary to meet their vocational aspirations (e.g., student wanted to obtain an M.D. and become a nurse), and 14% aspired to a level of education that would be inadequate to meet their vocational aspirations (e.g., student wanted to attend a two-year college and become a lawyer).

What This Tells Us

A majority of the RHSA students hoped to pursue jobs or careers that required them to finish high school and complete some college-level courses. In addition, a majority aspired to higher levels of education than would be needed to meet their vocational aspirations. A large number of these students intended to enter the healthcare field, a field with jobs still available in rural areas. Although most students aspired to a job that would require additional postsecondary education, nearly half reported they expected to work right after high school. Given the combination of vocational aspirations and the requisite schooling needed, it is imperative that students graduate from rural high schools prepared to complete the necessary postsecondary education needed to meet their vocational aspirations. Schools should assist students to develop career plans that will help them make a successful transition to the world of employment.

References

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