

## **Abstract**

Young people today face increasing academic, social, and familial pressures that can limit their ability to make independent decisions regarding education, careers, and personal goals. Many students report feeling unprepared for college and future careers while also lacking sufficient exposure to diverse pathways and decision-making resources. This gap often leads students to rely on authority figures, social media influence, or societal expectations rather than informed personal reasoning. This paper examines how external pressures influence student decision-making and explores systems that may strengthen independence and confidence. Drawing on concepts such as intelligence gathering and the “monkey off the back” management approach, the paper proposes a framework in which students learn to research opportunities, gather information from multiple sources, and reason through choices with guided mentorship rather than direct instruction. Evidence from workplace management models and intelligence-analysis practices suggests that guided questioning and structured information gathering can improve critical thinking, innovation, and ownership of decisions. Schools, educators, and community organizations may support this process through project-based learning, mentorship, and career exploration programs. While additional research is needed to test these strategies directly among students, these approaches may help young people become more informed, confident, and independent decision-makers in an increasingly pressurized environment.

## **Introduction**

Students are expected to do 20 different things at once. According to the CDC, suicide is the leading cause of death in high schoolers aged 14–18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Students are required to take difficult classes while maintaining perfect grades. They are expected to have a social life and make decisions about their future career after only looking at a handful of options for one year. Fewer than 30% of Gen Z-ers feel prepared for future education (National Institutes of Health, 2022). Furthermore, a survey conducted in California for high school students showed that 56% of students do not feel prepared for future college readiness and/or careers.

## **What is unknown?**

The pressure starts at a very young age: students are required to pick careers based on their liking at the time, while also focusing on a job that will pay well. Over time, students practice these skills and go to college to prepare for this career. By the time students realize that this career is not for them, they are already stuck in a cage of crippling student debt and skills that mostly help to make that student competitive in that specific field (National Institutes of Health, 2024).

Generational and familial pressure also put added stress on a student to pick that specific field or risk being alienated. A study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) draws data from 44 countries and shows a pattern of decline in familial support for adolescents in the academic landscape. This much pressure forces a student to take the first opportunity they can to escape. Students are often

unaware of the options presented because they are not provided adequate resources. This, in turn, makes them lose confidence, leading them to blindly follow someone in authority.

## **How should the gap be filled?**

Mirroring a human's behavior is psychological; in fact, the popular saying "Monkey see, Monkey do" emphasizes this very well. Students blindly copy what they see: social media trends, familial pressure, and influencers. All of these sources give the students a narrowed paradigm of what their career should look like. According to CollegeBoard, 9 in 10 students say they would like more career exploration opportunities as well as college options. Additionally, reports highlighted by Inside Higher Ed note that while 53% to 60% of high school students believe they can succeed without a degree and are open to alternative paths, only 11% of college students feel they deeply understand their options, indicating a major knowledge gap.

An essential evolutionary survival instinct is fighting for one's beliefs (Nicholson, 1998). Modern evolution calls this Neo-Darwinism. Humans have a natural urge to defend themselves and what they believe is right. If a student gained this level of confidence through strategic reasoning, they would be able to fight for their own beliefs and become who they want to be.

One problem many managers face is that their employees constantly take up their time to fix problems they are facing at work. Researchers at the Harvard Business Review studied a "monkey off the back" approach of asking questions that force the employee to think about the answer for themselves while the managers guide them (Oncken & Wass, 1999). This forced employees to become stronger, deeper thinkers. This also saved managers time to produce higher quality work: in essence, "getting rid of the monkey."

## **Methods**

Before any mission in the military, agents first gather intelligence on the suspect. This is done by planning and direction, collection, processing, analysis & production, and dissemination & feedback. This ensures that they have full knowledge of the task at hand and can properly execute a plan.

This process can also be replicated for students. Students can interview adults who have been in different careers and gather intelligence. Teachers and mentors can also use the "monkey off the back" approach to teach students how to make decisions for themselves. While many resources already exist for students, they need to know how to use them and learn how to gather feedback and intelligence to make their own decisions. This is something that schools can help with. Project-based classes can explain how intelligence gathering works and help students collect evidence about different jobs, career options, and higher education paths that would best fit them. Many non-profits also help connect students to industry leaders and educate students on the day-to-day requirements of their job. According to data tracking educational community partnerships, there are 233,897 non-profits that connect with schools to help students learn about different careers (*Journal of Education*, 2025).

## **Results**

In workplace practice, the “monkey off the back approach” has significantly improved sales and coordination. One example of this would be the software and video game distributing giant, Valve. This company famously utilizes the monkey management initiative. According to corporate reviews, Valve reports that keeping the monkey entirely off the managers’ backs has resulted in significantly more innovation, heightened creativity, and an elite culture of workplace collaboration.

On the other side, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the world’s most effective and versatile foreign intelligence-gathering agency, uses similar intelligence-gathering methods to make final decisions. According to the Intelligence Community, the CIA talks to multiple sources to gather feedback and information. They then analyze this information, asking questions and discussing feasible options with other co-workers. Then, they narrow their options down to a smaller list and start the process again to figure out a final suspect.

## **Discussion**

Students face a lot of pressure to make the perfect decision. Due to continuous pressure, students lose confidence and struggle to seek more options. Through this monkey-management model, students can practice intelligence-gathering skills in schools while analyzing and critically thinking about their choices. Schools can also connect with more non-profits so students have more “sources” to talk to.

These methods increase a student’s internal confidence and help them advocate for their own informed beliefs and goals. Students will be able to develop their own ideas and values, which, in turn, helps them make stronger decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Students today face increasing academic, social, and familial pressures that can limit their ability to make independent decisions about their futures. Many young people lack confidence and sufficient exposure to different educational and career pathways, causing them to rely heavily on authority figures, social expectations, or limited information. This paper proposes that combining intelligence-gathering strategies with the “monkey off the back” method may help students become more independent and strategic decision-makers. By learning to research opportunities, gather multiple perspectives, and reason through problems themselves while receiving guided support from mentors and educators, students may develop stronger confidence and ownership over their choices.

Although additional research and school-based testing are necessary to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these methods among students, similar approaches have already shown success in professional and organizational settings. Rather than simply giving students answers, schools and communities should focus on teaching them how to think, investigate, and defend their own informed decisions. Doing so may not only improve career and academic outcomes, but also help young people build stronger identities and greater independence in an increasingly pressurized world.

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